

## Chapter 123:

### Star Seed

In the Adventure Society marshalling yard, a portal opened and people started stepping through. There were fourteen in total, each bearing a pin marking them as Adventure Society officials. The woman at the front looked to be of early middle age, with her hair unflatteringly pinned tightly back. Her Adventure Society pin was black.

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Jason, Clive, Belinda and Sophie waited until the last memorial for the day had finished before moving outside to test Sophie's new abilities. The gliding had a few false starts, but the slow fall function of the power was intuitive enough that she went unharmed. Several attempts in, she was gliding out over the ocean before curving back in to land on the lower levels of the palace. She would have preferred if the earlier attempts hadn't involved dragging her waterlogged self onto one of the palace's sea-level platforms.

Aside from her gliding ability, being outdoors allowed her to test her wind blade. She could throw out a shimmering arc of slicing wind with a sweep of an arm or leg. A short gesture would produce a small, swift blade that was hard to see. A larger motion created a longer and more visible blade that was noticeably slower.

"Some abilities will come easily and naturally," Clive said. "Others you'll need to practice before you can use them effectively."

"We'll leave you to it, for today," Jason said. "Play around and get used to them. Tomorrow we start training."

"That Adventure Society assessment is in a week, right?" Belinda asked. "Is she going to be ready?"

"The next intake was cancelled," Jason said. "After days of memorials, no one is looking to feed their young people into the grinder. The assessments will be rigorous in a way they haven't been for a long time, with a few exceptions."

"Won't that make it harder for Sophie to pass?" Belinda asked.

"The field assessment judges two things," Jason said. "The skill to reliably hunt monsters and the judgement to know when not to. I won't let her participate until she's ready."

He looked at Sophie, standing unhappily in her still-wet clothes.

"No one is going to argue that you lack skill," he told her. "Have you ever fought a monster?"

She shook her head.

“Once Rufus deems you ready, I’ll take you out to the delta and we’ll do some adventure board notices. If you meet his standards, then passing the field assessment won’t be a problem.”

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A meeting was taking place in the conference room next to the director’s office in the Adventure Society administration building. At the head of the table but standing instead of sitting was the leader of the inquiry team, Tabitha Gert. Her clothes were plain, with the only flourish being her black Adventure Society pin. She wore a stern expression, accentuated by her tightly pulled-back hair. Elspeth Arella was also present, sitting to Gert’s right. Emir Bahadir sat at the other end of the table, his relaxed slouch a contrast with Arella’s poise and Gert’s rigidity.

“Is there a reason the director of the Magic Society is not here?” Tabitha asked.

“Lucian Lamprey would obstruct and inform because it serves his purposes, regardless of the outside consequences,” Arella said. This earned a pointed cough in her direction from Emir, which she responded to with a flat look.

“Having Lamprey here,” Arella said, turning back to Gert, “would be as good as sending the families in question an explanatory pamphlet detailing out intentions.”

“That’s very unhelpful,” Gert said.

“Of that, I am very much aware,” Arella said.

Gert turned her attention to Emir.

“You are convinced these five expedition members have been compromised?” she asked. “If I discovered that this was some manner of ploy to distract from the enquiry, it would not go well for you, gold-ranker or not.”

“I’m convinced that the political cost of forcing the issue and being wrong is preferable to leaving it alone and being wrong.”

Arella gestured at the door, which swung open of its own accord to admit Danielle Geller. Arella used her power again to close the door behind her. While Danielle would prefer to throw her out a window, she restricted herself to throwing Arella a dissatisfied glance before schooling her expression into blank professionalism.

“Sorry I’m late,” Danielle said. “I’ve just come from a water link communication with Jonah’s family.”

“This is the one of the five from your family?” Gert asked.

“He’s from a branch family of House Geller, but broadly, yes. I’ve just been speaking with his parents and the branch family patriarch.”

“This boy, Jonah,” Emir said. “He refuses to be examined?”

“Yes, just like the others,” Danielle said. “He’s been isolating himself from us. His behaviour screams that he sees us as some kind of threat.”

“I’ve just had word,” Arella said. “All five have withdrawn from their existing teams and formed a team together.”

“What?” Danielle asked. “When did this happen?”

“Around an hour ago. I’ve had my deputy director keep a discreet but watchful eye on any official activity related to the five.”

“We need to act,” Gert said. “However, it is outside the Adventure Society’s purview to forcibly subject the five to examination.”

“Jonah may not have consented,” Danielle said, “but I’ve explained the situation to his people. They have given me formal permission to act on their behalf regarding his welfare. They are making the legal arrangements as we speak and they’ll send everything through the Magic Society via document duplication.”

“There is a risk that word will get out that way,” Arella said. “Lamprey pays little attention to his own Magic Society but these are hardly ordinary times. Even if he maintains his inattention, his deputy is subtle and thorough.”

“A dangerous combination,” Emir said. “His loyalty?”

“To Lamprey. By all indications they are actual friends. My instincts tell me his only true allegiance is only to himself but I’ve never found so much as a hint of disloyalty, and I did quite a bit of looking.”

Gert frowned at Arella.

“Using the Magic Society for such communication is a necessary risk,” Gert said. “This city has seen quite enough activity operating outside of the rules.”

“We shouldn’t let rules get in the way of something potentially this important,” Emir said.

“There are always reasons to ignore the rules,” Gert said, “which is why we must be fastidious in following them. They are the very basis for civilisation, without which we would exist in a state of anarchy.”

“I disagree,” Emir said.

“I don’t care,” Gert said. “This operation is being conducted under the strictures of the Adventure Society, not one of your frivolous private excursions. Gold rank or not, you will follow instructions.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Once the legal documentation arrives,” Gert said, “We must act immediately to secure this Jonah boy. Have you lined up someone capable to examine him? The local Magic Society does not sound like a satisfactory place to find the assistance we need.”

“I’ve contacted the local high priest of Purity,” Emir said. “He’s politically detached and has as good a chance as anyone of finding anything that has been done to them and purging it safely.”

“You think there may be a danger?” Arella asked.

“The people we captured in the astral space all quite thoroughly killed themselves with some manner of object buried in their bodies,” Emir said. “My concern is our five adventurers coming to a similar end.”

“Turning to the church of Purity is a good choice,” Danielle said. “I want to send Jonah home to his family intact.”

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The arrival of the inquiry team from the Adventure Society’s Continental Council had little impact on Jason, at least over the first few days. He had not been a member of the expedition and was too low rank to be involved in major Society affairs. In the mean time, he had been working with Rufus to prepare Sophie for the next Adventure Society intake.

“Her skills are impressive,” Rufus said. He gave Sophie his own assessment but remained mostly hands-off, leaving Jason to introduce her to various aspects of adventuring. He took on more of a mentor role to Jason, offering advice and guidance on what to teach her, and how.

“Her skills are impressive,” Rufus said. “In terms of empty-hand technique, she’s better than I am. Her weapon-work isn’t as strong but given her abilities that won’t be an issue.”

“All the fighting she’s done has been against people, though,” Jason said.

Rufus nodded.

“Her lack of experience fighting monsters is unquestionably her main shortfall,” he said. “Take her out into the delta and do some adventure board notices. Recruit Humphrey, if you can. He has more immediate impact than you if someone needs to step in.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “Have you heard anything from his mother about the inquiry?”

“They’re auditing the whole branch,” Rufus said. “From what she’s hearing, there will be sweeping demotions across the board, expedition members or otherwise. More than a few will be losing their membership entirely.”

“I’ll probably get bumped back down to two stars,” Jason said. “I always suspected that moving up to three stars so quickly was part of Arella’s games, and I daresay this inquiry will agree.”

“I wouldn’t worry about local politics too much,” Rufus said. “Bronze rank will be a fresh start that you can make far from here. My part in the Remore Academy annex with the Gellers should time nicely with you ranking up and your indenture contract coming to an end. We can head for Vitesse, leaving this city and its troubles behind.”

“We have no ideas how things will look, six months from now,” Jason said. “There should be a monster surge by then, right?”

“There should be a monster surge by now,” Rufus said. “I’ll be interested in where your thieves will be in six months. Things are changing in very large ways for them.”

“That’s up to them,” Jason said. “The whole point was to give them the chance to choose their own path.”

“How goes the non-combat training?”

“I’ve been teaching them what Farrah taught me about meditation, aura manipulation. The mental exercises. Are you sure I’m ready to teach anyone?”

“Farrah was always impressed by you,” Rufus said. “We all saw the potential in you. You’re her legacy now.”

Jason face was stricken.

“Don’t say that,” he said. “I can’t live up to it.”

“None of us live up to the expectations we put on ourselves,” Rufus said. “Gary and Farrah taught me to accept that. But in the attempt, we push ourselves to new heights. You don’t have to be some shining representative of who she was. Just try and be an adventurer she would be proud to have trained.”

“That, I can do. It feels strange, passing on what she taught me to these women.”

“You’ve been teaching them both?”

“Wexler will get essences for her friend sooner or later. If she knows the meditation techniques and training exercises beforehand, that’s only for the good. Wexler tends to listen more with her friend riding herd on her, too.”

“Problems with the training?”

“Wexler’s walls are slowly coming down,” Jason said. “A lot of construction went into them, though. Building trust is half the battle.”

“Trust is crucial,” Rufus said. “If you want to teach her anything effectively, she needs to trust that what you’re imparting has value and that you’re doing so in good faith.”

“Any tips?”

“Don’t try to rush things. Let time do its work.”

Jason nodded.

“It won’t hurt to take a day off, then,” he said. “I haven’t seen Cassandra since the day the expedition got back.”

“You have plans?”

“She invited me to go sailing.”

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“They’re gone,” Genevieve said. The deputy director of the Adventure Society was in the director’s office, along with Danielle, Emir and Tabitha Gert.

“What about tracking their badges?” Gert asked.

“The fact that we couldn’t track their badges is what drew our attention to them in the first place,” Danielle said.

“They were all directed to have their aura’s re-examined and their badges replaced,” Arella said. “None of them showed up to do so.”

“Do we know anything?” Emir asked.

“I’ve already got my information network in Old City looking,” Arella said. “They don’t have the skills or the powers to hide from my people in Old City. If they’re there, we’ll find them. If they left, we’ll know which direction. Our best course of action now is patience.”

“How reliable is your network in Old City?” Gert asked.

“Now that everyone knows my father has me standing behind him, his power in Old City is unchallenged,” Arella said. “You couldn’t ask for better.”

“You said they don’t have the skills to hide,” Emir said. “That is assuming their skills are what they were. For all we know, they may not be in charge of their bodies anymore.”

“It doesn’t change our course of action,” Danielle said. “We have people looking, so we be patient and let them. Acting just for the sake of doing something is borrowing trouble when we already have enough.”

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All the major temples in Greenstone fronted the Divine Square but the of their space occupied extensive chunks of the temple district in sprawling, multi-building complexes. The temple of Purity was no different, with a number of sizeable buildings spread out over its spacious grounds. A priestess of Purity, Anisa Lasalle, walked through those grounds to a construction site in the early stages of adding a new building the temple’s collection.

On site was a foreman’s office made of what looked like hastily thrown together materials. Anyone with the right knowledge and the ability to see magic would realise that time, effort and expense had been put into the powerful protections against eavesdropping

built into the structure. Should anyone enquire, it was a sound-suppressing measure, allowing the foreman to hold meeting with the church representatives in peace and quiet.

After stepping inside the building, Anisa glanced around, sensing for gaps in the sound-shielding magic but finding it thorough and intact. The other occupant of the room looked every bit the ordinary construction foreman, yet she looked at him with a distaste undue a simple tradesperson.

“Well?” The man asked.

“Your thrown-together plan has been lucky enough to work,” Anisa said. “All the attention is on the five you seeded. No one has even considered that your true agents exist to look for. We suggest you restrict your activities for the moment, so as to not risk exposure.”

“Agreed,” the man said. “The next stage is reliant on remaining unnoticed.”

“You are certain that Bahadir will send people into another astral space?”

“Bahadir’s people are loyal and discreet, but the people they work with are not always the same. Our information is solid.”

“And this other astral space is still of sufficient scale to do as promised?”

“Oh, yes,” the foreman said. “It’s not the prize the desert astral space would have been, but still a very welcome one. As for the secondary effects of our claiming it, they will be more than enough to meet your needs. Better, in fact, since you won’t need to evacuate your people as far.”

“We are evacuating no one,” Anisa said. “It would arouse too much suspicion.”

“I admire your conviction,” he said. “After the adventurers have returned from this new astral space, we will need to become more active to carry out the next step. The risk of some of our agents being exposed during this phase is high.”

“They cannot be allowed to talk,” Anisa said.

“Again, we are in agreement,” he said. “We have more star seeds and any of our people who know anything will be implanted.”

“See that they are,” Anisa said. “We’ll speak again after the first stage is complete.”

“I look forward to it, priestess.”

“I don’t.”

She swept over to the door, flung it open and left, as if rushing to escape a trapped stench.