

Chapter 111: Strange Star

Most of the ill-fated expedition was extracted back through the aperture that had been their entry point. On the other side was a recovery camp, ready and waiting. Only silver rankers and bronze-rankers stayed in the astral space, and not all of them.

Every member of the new, streamlined expedition had either arrived with Emir or been hand-picked by Danielle and Thalia. They drew back to the island that had their underwater aperture just offshore, using it as a staging point. As preparations were made to track down their missing people, a steady stream of departing expedition members waded into the water and through the aperture just below the surface. The tricky part was managing the people still unconscious after being healed from extreme injury. The adventurers with water powers were employed to see them through.

With the withdrawal from the astral space organised, the next priority was to retrieve the adventurers who had become separated from the group. Teams led by silver rankers set out, using tracking stones to find them. Only once that was done would they turn to finding and destroying the enemy.

With only the cream of the expedition remaining, bolstered by Emir's people, Danielle was confident of eradicating the construct army and its masters. Her greatest concern was actually finding them. The follow-up attack she had been fearful of never arrived, and the search teams hadn't run into anyone but missing expedition members.

"There's a problem," Emir said. He was in the command tent with Danielle and Thalia.

"You'll have to narrow that down," Danielle said without humour.

"We still have nineteen missing people are still alive, according to their tracking stones," Emir said. "The problem is that for five of them, their stone indicates they're still alive, but can't track them.

"Could they have lost their badges, or had them taken?" Thalia asked

"If they lost them, we'd still be able to track the badges. The best explanation we can hope for is that the astral space has regions that naturally mask tracking. I've seen it in astral spaces before, although they were all less stable than this one."

"Not unheard of," Danielle said.

"It could be racial gift evolution," Thalia said. "Our lost people certainly have the right conditions to trigger it."

"We know ability evolutions change an ability to meet immediate needs," Thalia said. "An ability that prevents them from being tracked would make sense."

“But five people, all getting skill evolutions at once, and all the same or similar abilities?” Danielle asked. “It would be great if that’s what happened and they’re all fine, but we can’t anticipate that being the case.”

“The alternatives get worse from there,” Emir said. “Something may have happened to them that changed their aura so much that they no longer match the aura imprint on their badges, which would break the tracking magic. Which would suggest the enemy found them and did something to them.”

“Who are the five?” Danielle asked.

Emir looked at Thalia with sympathy.

“I’m sorry, but they include Jonah Geller and Thadwick Mercer.”

Thalia’s face twisted but she kept herself under control.

“What are we going to do about it?” she asked.

“Once we have the ones we can track,” Danielle said, “we need to sweep this whole place anyway. The goal is still to find out what is happening to the astral space and stop it. If our people are still out there to find, we’ll find them.”

“And how long will that take?” Thalia asked.

“We’ve surveyed enough to know the astral space is only a fraction of the size of the world it’s attached to,” Danielle said. “We don’t leave until we retrieve all our people, living or dead.”

“Quite right,” Emir said. “And as it happens, my people are specialists at finding things over large areas that are often hidden with magic. Hope is by no means an outlandish choice.”

Thalia nodded.

“I want to hear as soon as we find anything”

“Of course.”

The support camp outside the aperture was an array of large tents set up near the aperture. The aperture was in a crevice in a rocky outcropping and people were coming out in a steady stream. On the astral space side, the healers were in triage mode, healing people up just enough to send them through the underwater aperture. The soaking wet adventures were then sorted into two groups. Those in need of further healing were taken to the recovery tents, while the rest were sent to the dormitory tents.

Vincent was in charge of the camp and had roped Jason in as his assistant. There wasn’t much call for Jason’s cleansing ability, just the occasional infection. Vincent was in

charge of making the actual decisions, with Jason's job being to sort out any problems with enacting them.

Jason's biggest responsibility was dealing with people who weren't happy with the arrangements and keep them from bothering Vincent. It was, Vincent claimed, the entire reason he chose Jason to assist him. Even after escaping the horrors of battle, there were some who felt the need to complain about the accommodations. These were the ones who never saw the frontline and were evacuated first.

"You expect me to stay in a tent with all these people?" a nobleman asked Jason.

"You were in a tent during the expedition," Jason said.

"A private magical tent! This is just a tarp with poles, and as for what you generously describe as beds..."

"Listen, mate, you've got three options. Option one is taking the accommodation and shutting your damn mouth. Option two is you sod off into the desert and find your own way home. Option three is you hang about making a nuisance of yourself and your mouth gets shut for you."

"You think you can treat me like this? You have no idea who you're..."

"Fellas!" Jason called out loudly, over the top of the nobleman. "We've got another option three."

A pair of adventurers came into the tent, their bronze-rank auras visibly impacting the nobleman, who they led away. After a very thorough talking to, he would be placed with the other troublemakers in an isolated group of tents with people watching over them.

Rufus and Gary were sent back with the other bronze-rankers Danielle deemed unreliable. Gary gave a brief explanation of Farrah's absence before Jason sent the pair to the healers for further treatment. Afterwards Jason was sleepwalking through his duties in a daze until Vincent had someone take his place. Suddenly free, Jason went looking for Gary and Rufus.

He found them in the dormitory tents, having been sent there after their healing was completed. Rufus sitting on a cot bunk, staring blankly into nowhere. He wasn't alone. Everyone in that tent had lost friends or family. It was a cluster of misery and shock.

Jason sat next to Rufus, not saying a word as Gary told the story in detail. Afterward, the three sat in silence for a long time, other adventurers bustling around them. Finally, Jason stood up, patted Rufus on the shoulder on shoulder and went back to work.

Emir and his people quickly rounded up the scattered adventurers. Even the five who couldn't be tracked were recovered in short order, found so badly injured that their auras barely registered, to even silver-rank senses. The search teams stumbled across all five while tracking the others.

Emir watched Thalia fussing over Thadwick. He was still unconscious after being healed and she was arranging Cassandra to take him back through the portal. Walking back into the command tent, Danielle was already present. There was a troubled frown on her face.

"Something the matter?" Emir asked. "Beyond the obvious, I mean."

"It was too easy," Danielle said. "Our search teams found all five without even looking. That makes the back of my neck itch."

"You think they were left for us?" Emir asked.

"How often does an adventurer's aura shift so much their tracker doesn't work?"

"I don't know," Emir said. "I've heard of it happening after intense trauma, and you saw the condition they were in."

"Have you seen it before?" Danielle asked.

"No."

"You haven't seen it once, and we have five at the same time?"

"It does sound suspicious when you say it out loud. We can have the Magic Society examine them."

"It won't be that easy," Danielle said. "Their families will resist. If something has been done to them, their families will want to quietly handle it. Letting the Magic Society look into it takes control out of their hands."

"That's incredibly short-sighted," Emir said.

"Welcome to the politics of Greenstone."

"What about the one from your family?"

"Once we return to Greenstone I'll use a speaking chamber to talk to his parents. They should have no priority beyond what's best for their son. The problem is the director of Greenstone's Magic Society branch. He'll definitely come down on the side of the families, to the point of refusing to have any of them examined."

"That's not good."

"No," Danielle said. "We may have to have Jonah examined ourselves and go from there."

“I have trouble believing people would choose ignorance. I would have thought they would want to know if something has been done to their family members. Perhaps we can convince them of that.”

“Have you not met people?” Danielle asked. “We love choosing ignorance. This is not the time to start a fight over it. Right now, everyone has lost people. It won’t pay to poke at raw wounds.”

“Then the best we can do for now is keep an eye on them. In the meantime, we have more work to do.”

Danielle nodded. Their original task was to investigate what was going wrong with the astral space, and what they found inside made finding the truth all the more important. She had tasked Emir with fetching back the scattered adventurers while she reorganised the expedition. The group was pared-down to its best and reinforced by Emir’s people, all of whom were not only capable, but experienced in exploring unusual environments.

With the missing adventurers retrieved, there were now teams thoroughly sweeping the islands. They were finding regular traces of the enemy’s activities, brining back various magical paraphernalia from abandoned work sites. It was quickly becoming evident that their enemy had been occupying the astral space for months, if not years. After the battle with the expedition, however, all signs pointed to a very rapid withdrawal. Every site they found showed signs of immediate evacuation.

“Thank you for this,” Cassandra said, squeezing Jason’s hand. He had organised a separate tent for the five adventurers whose tracking had failed. They were all restored to health, but would not wake for some time.

“The least I can do,” he said, giving her a tired smile. “Not the reunion I was expecting.”

“I need to get back,” Cassandra told him. “There’s still work to do.”

He nodded, looking around the bustling camp. There were over a hundred people now, many of whom seemed to feel like they should be in charge of it. His early, stop-gap measures were being overrun by sheer numbers and he could no longer shield Vincent from the pressure.

“There’s work enough here, too,” he said.

“I heard about your friend,” she told him. “I didn’t know her well, but I’m sorry. Are you doing alright?”

“No, but are any of us? We all lost friends. I’ll see you again when this is all done.”

The edges were marked by a rainbow-coloured void of chaotic energy, radiating a powerful aura that gave even Emir pause. The astral space, while certainly vast, turned out to be only a fraction of the size of the desert. Even so, there were hundreds of islands, of which the teams could thoroughly search around a dozen each day.

The enemy had fled, leaving most of their constructed army to harry pursuing forces. There were also ordinary monsters to contend with, but neither posed a real threat to the powerful search teams.

The enemy leadership themselves fled through various apertures. The teams followed them through, usually finding they had caused chaos on the other side before vanishing into various areas of the desert. Not all managed to escape, however, and the teams managed to capture two of the enemy leaders. Like the others they had seen, under the robes they were horrifying fusions of steel and flesh. The two leaders gave up no information, suiciding in explosive fashion on being caught.

Emir increased his personal participation in the search, hoping his gold-rank power would let him take someone alive. He approached an enemy camp alone, his aura restrained as his senses spread out. It had been a major encampment, once, with cleared land and wooden huts. Now it was mostly deserted, Emir sensing only one living aura and a plethora of constructs.

Emir closed in on the camp through the thick forest, finally close enough to take a look. He saw the one robed figure packing tools into a dimensional bag, surrounded by artificial guardians. Watching from hiding, Emir was holding an open suppression collar in one hand and a conjured staff in the other. The staff had a black, stone shaft with golden script running down it and golden caps at each end.

He slammed the base of the staff into the ground and copies of it erupted from the ground under every construct creature. The iron-ranked constructs exploded into chunks at the sheer force, the bronze likewise destroyed at a blow. The silvers survived, but were tossed into the air and Emir was already moving. He vanished from the spot, leaving an illusory afterimage behind as he appeared next to the startled human. Emir had already dropped the staff and used both hands to snap the suppression collar around the human's neck.

Emir's concern was that suppression collars took a few moments to adapt to the wearer and suppress their powers. The human's hands shot up to pull the collar off, but Emir slapped his hands away. Emir could sense the affect on the enemy's aura as the man's powers were suppressed. The enemy sneered at Emir, lunging towards him as Emir sensed a silver-rank power suddenly rising up inside the man. It wasn't the man's own

power, but something inside him. Emir retreated in an instant, leaving another afterimage in his place.

Huge, crystalline spikes erupted from the man in every direction, greater in volume than the man's own body. They ripped him to shreds from the inside, leaving a bloody carcass draped over a strange star of jagged crystal.

A half-dozen damaged, silver-ranked constructs fell out of the air. Emir moved in a blur as he conjured his staff again and smashed them apart before moving to examine the dead man and the bloody sculpture that had emerged from him. He could sense the magic had faded, leaving an inert object for him to examine.

"That's not something you just come across on the street," he muttered to himself as he looked it over. As he did so, he was joined by Constance, his chief of staff.

"This is what happened with the other two," she told him.

"It wasn't his power," Emir said. "It was some kind of object inside him. If we manage to catch up to another one, we'll need some way to negate it."