Chapter 110

I looked at the wolfkin Serina.  With my growing power, I felt I did not need to hide my nature as much as in the past.  I still played it safe, “I am a friend of Rincewind.  He is aware of what I can do and has been advising me.”

Name-dropping had been the correct route as the curious woman reclined in her chair and went into deep thought.  Artica was doing her best bodyguard act, being quiet and acting properly.  Maybe it was because her sister was present.  Jade asked, “Serina is your father Dakkon Duskstalker?”

Serina smiled knowingly, “Only billionaire on the wolfkin council.  He is the one paying for all this prep work to fight the aboleth.”

Jade asked, “The wolfkin are sending just the one team?”

She shifted in her seat, “The vamps are sending two, and the Magus Arcanum is sending two.  We are the fifth.”

My attention sharpened, “Isn’t there an independent team as well?  Led by Rincewind?”

“Oh, yes, I heard there was a sixth team but was unaware of the individuals involved.  You are apparently higher up the food chain than even my father,” Serina said coley.

I admitted, “I plan to be on Rincewind’s team.”

Serina pursed her lips, thinking, “I will be leading one of the wolfkin teams.  Maybe we could train together?” Serina’s indicated she wanted to train in more than combat.  Artica shifted in her seat, ready to intervene, clearly not liking the wolfkin coming onto me.

Jade spoke first, “I am actually on Rincewind’s team as well.  Along with Apollyon’s bodyguard,” she pointed to a smug Artica. “We are too busy preparing ourselves to take you up on your offer.”

The flight was relatively quiet after Jade stonewalled Serina.  We landed in Bermuda.  The crystal blue waters as we landed made me want to return and vacation here.  A helicopter was already spinning up as we walked down the ramp from the plane.

Serina joined us on the flight to the ship.  It was a lot quicker than expected, and we landed on the deck of a large ship.  The ship was not fancy; to me, it looked like a small tanker with two helicopter pads. As the helicopter spun down, I could see the portal stretching into the sky.  It was about 100 yards off the bow of the ship.  A group of men dressed in heavy combat gear came out to greet us.

One of the men I recognized as Armon from Nautilus’ dojo. I was in my adult form now, and I had met him as Caleb, so he was not going to recognize me. One of the larger men came forward and gave a short bow to Selina, “Greetings, team leader.”

Selina responded, “Is everything ready?” He nodded curtly. “This is Apollyon. I will go to the bridge and bring the ship forward to the transit.”

The large man started giving orders, and his team geared up. They each hefted large backpacks as well and went to stand on the empty helo pad. My group followed them. The large man came to me, he looked Asian in his human form, “Thank you for doing this. Getting a device out here usually takes weeks to open this portal. You are saving us a lot of hassle.”

I nodded as I still did not quite understand the rarity of the devices that were used to open portals. The ship ebbed forward into the portal that only I could see clearly. I opened the rift, and the wolfkin hustled through. Jade, Frost, and Artica looked at me, and I motioned for them to enter. The portal was getting unstable, and I would have to do some research in the future to figure out how much mass could enter each time I opened a gate. I followed after they entered.

The transit sky was as I remembered. I was on a beach with thick bluish sand. The wolfkin team was already walking down the beach. In the distance, there was a stone wall indicating a city’s border. We were really on the doorstep, just under a mile by the looks of the wall.

Jade announced, “Everyone goes natural. No need for a guise.” Jade, Artica, and Frost transformed and looked at me.

If I was going to use a 100 life essence for a new form, now would be the time. I had studied all the sketches Carrie and Kiri had prepared for me and even imported them into my mind space. I retrieved the sketches in my mind space and created the image of the new elf body. It was similar to creating a construct but not taking the final step of infusing it with life essence. Lilith was the first to find me working on the new construct, with Casper right behind.

“Wow, that is one muscular elf. Is this going to be the first male among us? Pandora will definitely like the package on this one,” Lilith said with a tone of humor.

“It is not a mind space construct but a new form for me to use in the real world.” I inspected the body in detail to make sure I got it right. The face looked like a very charismatic elf. The body was overmuscled for an elf, and the genitalia was the same size as my human form—that was Kiri’s suggestion. I thought this was my best choice, rather than make myself both a beastkin form and elf form. I would save life essence just by making one, and I was choosing the elf, so going to the elf city of Kealon would be easier.

I looked up at the banner and was getting ready to finalize the body when Pandora, Nashima, and Calypso walked in. They all inspected the naked elf male in the central pedestal room. There were a few comments, but I just focused on getting ready for the last step. As I invested the 100 life essence, the elf body dissipated in front of me, and my banner added a new row indicating an elf form in addition to the succubus and incubus forms.

I activated the elf form, and returned to my body. I was back on the beach and felt different. The elf male had longer hair and a thinner waist. I kept my height the same to make coordination easier. Artica commented first, “Not bad looking for an elf. Not that I have seen too many elves before.”

We all started walking toward the walled city. Being an elf and walking with three cat women felt a little surreal. Jade jokingly said, “If they don’t like elves, I will just tell them you are my slave. Maybe we should put a collar on you just in case.” I did not appreciate her humor.

I watched a few air skiffs flying above the city, and I wondered if this city was the origin of the beastkin air skiff that had been to Danila’s forest and been in the crab cave. We reached a small gate and entered the city, walking past a single uninterested wolfkin guard. Inside the small gate, my companions were in awe of all the various beastkin walking around freely. I was as well, but I was also watching for their reactions to me being an elf. So far, no one had given me a second glance.

I turned to Jade, “So do you know where the trade district is located?”

“I studied the layout of the city. If we follow the wall to our right, we should reach it after a while. I am assuming that was where the wolfkin team went. A team will usually sell their payload and then use the funds to purchase specific items. I am guessing they are headed to a specific vendor they have dealt with in the past,” Jade answered and started walking, and we followed. The smells of the city were not too pleasant as they reminded me of a wet dog.

The density of the traffic started to increase the closer we got. I used my abyssal eyes, and most everyone had a tier 1 core, most of them upper. Of the hundreds of people I focused on, I only identified two lower tier 2 cores during the entire walk, indicating how rare they were in even the transit.

The trade district was underwhelming. Large carts were displaying their wares. It looked like mostly food and herbs. Seeing my disappointment, Jade said, “Most of these plants have infused aether and are used in brewing potions and making medicines. The people who run the carts are the local foragers. There should be actual shops further into the trade district.” She paused at a cart, asking, “Are we just checking things out, or are we actually shopping?”

“I brought five pounds of gold coins. I don’t know if that is enough to get anything. I wanted to see if they had any core obfuscation devices, shield bracers, or shield belts,” I said as we walked. There were a dozen languages in the air, none English. My translation devices were working as I heard peddlers talking up their wares. We finally passed into more structured shops and actual buildings with storefronts. The three women with me checked out almost every shop.

We eventually found a money changer. The money changer was an old wolfkin. I gave him four gold coins from my pack to get them exchanged for local currency. Artica was at my side while I worked with him. He weighed the gold and then gave me the local currency, which seemed like plastic chips you might find in a casino. It looked like they were something that could be easily made on Earth. I mentioned this out loud, and the money changer laughed and said each coin had an aether signature. If I tried to pass off fakes, I would find myself in jail in short order.

We continued our tour of the market district and finally found a shop selling shielding devices. The proprietor was a foxkin who was fairly short. He impatiently asked, “Elf, are you just going to look all day, or are you going to make a purchase?” His tone told me he did not like elves.

Jade stepped in, seeing I was going to have trouble dealing with his bias, “Can you tell me more about your shielding devices?”

The foxkin focused on her, “I have a few tier-one shielding belts available. Two at 150 credits and two at 200 credits.”

The chips I received totaled 90 credits. I nudged Jade to continue. She asked, “What is the difference between the two belts?”

The foxkin looked at Jade and then me before answering, “The 150 credit belt can sustain four or five solid hits before needing a recharge. The higher-priced belt is good for about eight hits.  A single hit is about the power of an average sword strike.  Stronger strikes will drain the belt more.”

Jade looked at me, and I nodded.  She asked, “Do you only take local chips, or will you take gold?”

The foxkin smiled, “I always prefer straight gold.  City credits are….” He paused and discarded what he planned to say.  “Which belt do you want, tigerkin?”  He really didn’t like me as he avoided even looking at me.  I motioned for Artica to use the gold coins in her pack.

She had enough coins for all the belts, and we purchased all four of them.  The two lesser belts were braided leather with a large black steel buckle.  The stronger belts were layered leather strips with the same black steel buckle.  After we completed the purchase, the foxkin smiled as he moved the gold to a safe.  Artica asked, “Do you have any core obfuscation devices?  Something that gives a false reading on a core?”

The foxkin rubbed his chin, “Trying to be appear stronger than you actually are?  I have a device that will show your core slightly stronger.”

“No, we are looking for something to reduce our core strength,” Jade entered the conversation.

“Those are much easier to artifice.  I can special order a medallion to reduce your apparent core by half a tier,” he said. “Maybe 100 credits for the device.”

“Anything more powerful?  Maybe two full tiers?” Artica asked impatiently, knowing what I wanted.

“Two full tiers?  Wow, maybe.  I would have to contract it out.  Would take a few months,” the foxkin stated thoughtfully. “Maybe 10,000 credits, probably more since it would take a tier two aether stone to make something that power.”

I discarded the idea of buying the aether core obfuscation device and asked, “Do you have shield bracers?  The ones that act like small bucklers?”

He turned an irritated gaze on me, “Nothing in stock.” He sighed, resigned to talk with the elf, “The shop two doors down should have some.” Maybe he just wanted me to leave. I thought he might have been more open to a human instead of an elf.  
  
We left the shop and were done with shopping. I did not have plan to check out the store the foxkin had suggested. I took one of the heavy belts for myself and gave the other one to Artica.  I gave one of the lesser belts to Jade, and the fourth belt was going to Bedelia.

We continued to wander the shops and came to the slave district.  I was immediately sick.  Lots of cages lined the slave market.  We walked past lots of dead-eyed men and women.  Most of the slaves were human.  There were a few elves and a few beastkin.  Maybe eighty slaves in total.  I was not the only one in my group that found it horrific.  I pitied the people in the cages, but I could not do anything about it.

I wished I had never come to this part of the trade district.  Jade motioned to one of the cages.  It was a male tigerkin.  She went and talked with the slave dealer.  Jade returned to our group, “He was convicted of murder.  They want 1500 credits to transfer his bond.  That seems to be the typical amount for a slave, about 1500.”

I shook my head.  I didn’t have enough gold left to free even one slave.  “Even if I came back and purchased all the slaves, it would just encourage them to enslave more people to make more money,”  I said, offering my view.

Frost spoke for the first time, “He is right.  Buying a slave just encourages them to continue.  We are best left leaving it alone.”

With that, we circled back to the gate we entered through.  It was not the only gate in the city.  The other two gates actually had paved roads heading to other cities in the transit according to Jade.  Our small gate just went to the beach.  As we walked on the sand, I looked out into the ocean.  It was the first large body of water I had seen in the transit.  I asked Jade, “Are there a lot of oceans in transit?”

Jade looked out as well, “Not many.  Knowing them all and the shape of their shorelines can help you orient yourself inside the transit.  Same with the mountain ranges.  Our transit from Earth only has one mountain range, and it has snow-covered peaks.”

I paused as we reached the transit portal.  Jade announced, “We still have about forty minutes before they are due back.”

We all sat in the sand and watched the light waves on shore.  The trip had been mildly successful.  We had gotten some shielding artifacts and learned a little about what a transit city was like.  Maybe I should have tried to enter as a human, but I only remembered a dozen or so humans walking around the city, and none looked happy.

The wolfkin party was walking down the beach, their backpacks much lighter.  The leader said they were waiting on one more member when they reached us.  He had gone to a different part of the city and did not reach the rendezvous location.  We would wait for the departure time and leave whether he showed up or not.

As time ticked by, I asked, “So, what did you all bring to trade?”

The leader thought my question was funny, “There is not much industry in the transit.  So trading non-electronic goods is usually a good way to make money.  Any snacks with a high salt content are also great to sell in the cities.  Avoid high-sugar foods.  Dark chocolate sells well, though.  If you want, I can write you a list.”

“That would be fantastic.  I don’t know if I will return to this particular city, but I plan to return to the transit,” I said congenially. I was certain each city had its own preferred trade goods based on the demographics.

“Yeah, you are only the second person I have ever met that could open a portal without the use of a device.  I can see why Dakkon was so interested in you,” the veteran soldier said.

“So what did you purchase to help with the upcoming fight with the aboleth?” I inquired.

“Sorry, but that is privileged information. But yes, most of the items that we consigned today are for the impending encounter with the cosmic horror.” He shrugged apologetically.

His watch beeped, and he looked back toward the city for his missing member. There was no one coming. I was shocked we were going to leave someone behind like this. It was not Armon as he was standing and talking with his comrades. I waited as the minutes ticked by, and the leader just stared down the empty beach. I was willing to wait, being in no rush.

Finally, after nearly forty minutes, he sighed and told me, “Take us home.”

I opened the portal, and we all stepped through. The weather was picking up on the ocean, but the ship was in place, and we did not end up in the water. The helo ride to Bermuda had just me and my three companions on board. Our plane was also ready to leave as soon as we boarded, and I seriously thought about getting a personal plane in the future. Serina was not on the return flight; we just had the two pilots.

Once the plane was in the air, Artica leaned into me. “Caleb, you said we could join the mile-high club on a private plane.” She motioned with her hand.