Chapter 152

I had just told the attendant at the desk that I was in the city to join a clan.  Vida was upset, “Caleb, the size of an orc, is a status symbol.  And your skin is white, making you part of the ice orc clans that conquered this world and most of the inhabited moon.  Every powerful ice orc clan in the city will send a representative to see you.  Some will check your fighting prowess by challenging you when you walk the city to see if you are worthy.”

“Why didn’t you say that would happen?”  I asked.  I was not concerned about any challenges as I knew my demonic physical attributes were far superior to any orc.

“I assumed you would tell everyone you are here to establish a new clan with us as your child bearers.”  She heaved a sigh, “It made sense with you having four women trailing you.”

Iris asked, concerned, “Were you planning to trick Caleb into having sex with you?”  The accusation had Vida show little remorse, just a knowing smirk.  When I had first found Vida, I had charmed her.  I eventually never renewed the charm, but I knew the effect could last—like reprogramming.  Somehow, she had latched onto the conditioning and was yearning for a closer relationship—a much closer relationship.  At least, that is what Abigail and I had surmised.

Vida didn’t like the stares and stood, “I will go into the city and see about getting us closer to the transit.”

Aurora quickly stood as well, “I will go with her.”

Vida did not seem to want the company but relented.  Should I be concerned about Vida possibly betraying me?  It seemed farfetched before we came here, but she had been acting odd and not being as helpful as I would have liked.  “Bedelia, you go as well.  You are disguised as an ice orc, so you can hopefully keep those two out of trouble who are not pale of skin.”  Vida stuck out her tongue at me like a child, but smiled right after.  She didn’t wait for the others and left, forcing the other two to grab things and follow.

After the three of them left, I turned to Iris.  I wanted to delve into my questions, and asking them away from the others seemed best.  “When I left with Vanhi to fly away and transfer the money, did anything happen?”

Iris looked confused, “What do you mean?  We talked with Haibaikel for a few minutes, and then you returned.”

I narrowed my eyes a little in confusion, “A few minutes?  I was gone for over twenty minutes because we had to get over ten miles away to get a cell signal.  Are you sure it was only a few minutes?”  I asked while activating my seductive gaze and charming eyes.

I did not feel any resistance, so Iris had not been charmed, nor was she currently under the djinn’s influence in any way.  I did not apply the charm and let it slide away.  She looked confused, “It was less than five minutes Caleb.  I am sure.  Haibaikel told us of his favorite child-bearer.  A human woman with red hair…”  She trailed off.  “That is strange.  I was sure he told us more than just her hair color.  I feel like I know her and should be able to picture her, but it is just beyond my reach, like a memory from when I was a baby.”

I sighed, “I guess Nashima was right.  He did do something or is planning something.  He probably erased your memory of what he did to you all.  Bedelia has a mind space and a construct.  Maybe she was able to resist his geas or brainwashing or whatever he did.”  Iris looked upset that she had been spelled.   I reassured her, “Don’t worry.  We will figure it out.  I put the scroll he gave Vida in my mind space to secure it.  I assume the efeert’s plan had something to do with it since he gave it to her.”

“Could I have been programmed to do something, Caleb, like harm you?”  Iris was getting agitated and fidgety.

“No, I did not detect any outside influence on you.  My charm would have taken hold and was not competing with anything like the aboleth puppets or Inquisitor Santiago. Haibaikel just took away your memories or stunned you.”  I said slowly, with my face becoming a mask of concern.  If Iris had lost fifteen minutes, there were a number of things the efeert could have done.

“What are you thinking, Caleb?”  Iris said, even more worried.  I never showed much concern, and I had just thought of something that was a little too malicious.

I answered honestly, though, “I was thinking he could have given you and the others a child.  Not all creatures need to have physical sex to conceive.  It is just a thought, and I doubt it is true,” I said, trying to sound reassuring.  But for some reason, it made sense to me from my impression of the efeert.

Iris immediately vomited.  I moved to her and comforted her.  She was breathing heavily and finally spoke, “Bedelia can use her sight to see if....  She could…I don’t want to…I am not ready to…why would he?”  I hugged her close and held her.  I probably should not have voiced my suspicions.

Aurora returned an hour later with a large sack of food items from the city food carts.  She had a small smile and some type of blue powder on her face, “The food is really good.  I didn’t think it would be, but orcs are good at cooking.  Or at least they like eating things that taste good.”  She took in the scene and asked, “What happened?” She eyed me suspiciously at Iris’ obvious upsetness.

“We will wait for Bedelia to see if there is anything to worry about.  Where are they?  And how did you pay for those?”  I asked Aurora while breaking from a still-panicked Iris.

“I traded some Snickers bars.  Told them they were from a transit city and got a gold for the case.  I don’t think they have chocolate or peanuts here.  Although, now I am out of Snickers for myself,” Aurora said, slightly sad. She sat next to Iris and offered her what looked like a muffin with blue frosting. Iris ate it, and her eyes went wide in surprise. Her concern was temporarily shelved.

We had to wait for another twenty minutes before Bedelia and Vida returned.  During the interim, we sampled the local orc food that Vida had purchased from vendors.  I was only mildly worried that Snickers would reveal we were from Earth.  Aurora said the markets had goods from a dozen different transit cities and even other worlds.  It made me wonder if Earth wasn’t kept in the dark about the greater supernatural world, would such an array of goods also be offered there?

Iris had recovered some and pointed out that the packaging was in English.  That alone would be an indicator of where the candy had originated.  I brushed it off as I planned to leave Mercanious tomorrow.  How many people in this one city on Mercanious would be familiar with English?  We would explore the transit and look for signs of Iris’ parents.  My larger concern was moving up to the twenty-second layer.  We knew it was another planet inhabited by orcs but did not know much beyond that.

Vida was eager to give what news she had turned up in the city, but I held her off.  I took Bedelia aside and started by asking, “Bedelia, when I flew off to transfer the money to Vahni, what happened?”

Bedelia thought hard for a moment.  “He told us about his favorite child’s mother.  Razel…Rennzie…Rod…I can not remember her name.  Just that she had red hair.  Why?”

“Can you ask your mind constructs if anything happened when I was gone?”  I said patiently.

“I only have a single mind construct, Caleb.  And she is not very useful yet, not like yours.  I still struggle with assimilation of books,” Bedelia reiterated her shortcomings.  “I will go and talk with her, but I am not sure what you want me to remember.”

Bedelia entered her mind space and returned after a few minutes.  She did not have the same extreme time dilation that I enjoyed in my mind space.  “Nothing.  My construct doesn’t remember anything from the encounter. He must have done something to me,” she was also concerned. “What happened?”

We were in the sitting room, away from the others, and I asked quietly, “Can you check if you are all pregnant?  Iris said you could do that.”

Her eyes narrowed and widened in realization.  Her eyes went white as she used her spells.  She mumbled with some relief, “I am not pregnant.”  A few seconds later, “Iris is clear too.  Aurora as well.”  It was a good five minutes before Bedelia blinked her eyes to normal. She had pursed lips, “Vida is.  How did you know?”

“It was just a guess based on how Haibaikel was acting and focused on Vida.  I actually thought he might have done it to all of you,” I admitted.

“What do we do?  Vida is carrying a genasi.”  She thought hard for a moment, “I think it takes about ten months, a little longer than a human.  But then again, orcs are only about seven months to term.  So, I don’t know if it averages out.  It is just a few hundred cells now, but definitely a pregnancy.” I was actually impressed that Bedelia ability could see something so small. She had said her powers were growing stronger with her core.

“We will tell Vida and let her decide.”  I was unsure how the djinn valued his offspring, but I would have preferred to remain on good terms with him if we needed a ride.  But if this was done against Vida’s will, then I just might kill him or find a way to kill him—once I was much stronger.

I decided to let Bedelia and Iris handle the news to Vida.  I remained in the sitting room while they traveled to the bedroom to talk with her.  A few minutes later, something slammed into the wall, and I guessed Vida was not handling it well.  She stormed out of the bedroom and left the room. Iris and Bedelia emerged right after.

“It went that well?  Looks like I have to make plans to kill one efeert,”  I said coldly.

Iris replied, “She was tricked.  The efeert had stunned all of us except Vida in order to talk with her alone.  Haibaikel promised he would help her get your affections. All she had to do was give him permission to use her body. Vida thought he would make her look more appealing to you, but apparently, it was for carrying a child. I think she is just as mad at being fooled as being pregnant.  It was a wish-granting, so I am assuming the scroll is something to make you fall for Vida.  At least, that is what she thinks it is.  You are supposed to read it.”

“This is all too crazy, and I can see why people do not trust the djinn,” I said, exasperated.

“They don’t trust demons either,”  Aurora noted while eating a massive meat pie.  “We should probably go after her.”  Usually, I would let her cool off, but we were in a somewhat dangerous city.

Bedelia stood, “I have a decent idea of the layout of the town now.  I will go after her.”  A loud knock at the door had everyone freeze.

I moved and opened it.  A fat gray-skinned orc in ornate clothing was there.  He bowed his head, “Gundella, Clan Head of Whispering Rock, wishes you to dine with her this evening, Champion Apollyon.”  He handed me an invitation written in silver ink on a stiff parchment.

Bedelia was on my side, “Don’t decline.  I learned Whispering Rock is one of the more powerful clans in the city.  If you turn them down, it will cause trouble for us.”  I looked back at the messenger and at Bedelia, who shrugged helplessly.

“Fine.  I will have dinner with your clan head.”  I conceded.  He handed me the parchment, gave me a slight bow, and left.

Once the door was closed, Bedelia exhaled in a little relief.  “Three clans control this city.  Whispering Rock, Haunted Waters, and Fiery Snow.  Angering any of them would be met with reprisal. Six orcs were strung up in the market for insulting the clan leader of Haunted Waters in a tavern last night.”

Bedelia left to retrieve Vida, but I soon had an invitation from the other two clans.  I indicated to each I already had a dinner invite and would meet with them on a different evening.  I planned to leave tonight before I had to make good on any of them.  Bedelia returned with Vida, who had not gone far but had taken some time to vent.  Vida was still furious with the efeert but calmed down slightly to explain what the invitations meant.

“At least it was the ruling clans that got to you first.  You could have been solicited by a dozen lesser clans.  They are all seeking to either add you to their personal guard or as a stud to breed the females in their clan,” Vida explained. “All orcs of unusual size, even the grays and greens, are given special treatment. Almost like gods.”

Bedelia noted, “I talked with Vida about this today.  The orcs know about genetics.  They see you as a source to improve the clan, your balls anyway.” She slapped my orc ass and smiled.

I focused on Vida, “Vida, are you alright? We can do whatever you want in regards…”

“I will think about it.” She absently touched her stomach.

Aurora broke the tension. She noted, “That is good.  Caleb can harvest some life essence before entering the transit from the Whispering Rock orcs.”

Vida shook her head, “We need to be careful. They might try to kill us…his female followers.  That would be so he does not waste his energy or seed on us,” she added harshly.  “Ice orcs of his stature are rarely not associated with a clan.  They see him as an opportunity.  You should just meet with the Whispering Rock clan and say you are considering their offer, whatever it may be.”

I shook my head, not liking where this was going. I felt like my companions were pimping me out. “What else did you two learn? Can we get into the pyramid and close enough to use the transit portal to leave?”

Having forgotten about her problem, Vida answered, “Yes. The Fiery Snow Clan controls the structure. They have a number of shamans and mages in their number. They also control who is sent through the portal to your world,” she added bitterly. “But passage into the transit is relatively cheap. We could buy our way in the next time it is open. Or you can just open the portal yourselves.”

 “What about the other two clans? What do they control?” I asked.

Everyone waited for Vida to answer, “The Whispering Rock is a commerce clan. They control much of the trade through the city and the region. They probably ran the mining town we came from. The Haunted Waters Clan is a political entity that spans the entire planet. This branch is very weak, but they have influence elsewhere. I am not certain, but I think the Whispering Rock Clan is only based in this city. Most of the minor clans in the city are warrior clans. There are dozens of those.”

Iris asked, “And the Fiery Snow Clan? Are they also found in other cities?”

Vida shook her head no, “The portals are each controlled by a different clan to spread the authority. Since they connect to a transit, they have great influence in the city on the other side.”

Aurora asked, “Why go through all this trouble? Why not just find a transit in the wild?”

Vida stood, “There are none. None left, anyway. I asked around, and each transit location has a city pyramid. Over the last two hundred years, two cities have had their transit threads snapped. It should have re-anchored elsewhere on the planet, but that is not the case.”

I looked at Iris, who understood. “They are cutting the planet off from the Source then. Mercanious will become barren over time,” I announced.

Bedelia was going to voice her dissension but slowly nodded. It made sense. Bedelia asked, “How many orc cities are there left that have access to a transit?”

Vida shrugged. She had been a low-born orc and did not receive much education beyond basic reading. “A hundred? I would think less than one hundred and fifty, but I have never studied the maps.”

“The lost transit access does support the theory the angelics are planning to cut Mercanious from the Source. The question is, do I meet with Gundella of Whispering Rock? And Vida, I am sorry to ask this question, but what do you want to do about…”

“I will keep the child, Caleb. She had no choice in the matter, but I will make sure Haibaikel never seduces her,” she said with harshness not expected from Vida.

Iris was behind Vida and hugging her in support. Just a few hours ago, I was doing the same thing for Iris when I thought the djinn might have violated her. Bedelia also supported me saying, “We need to keep up our disguises, Caleb. Since you made the error at the desk saying you were looking for a clan to join, I think you should meet with the clan head. Hopefully, it will keep the rest of the clans from bothering us.”

Aurora was chewing on some jerky-like meat, “Yeah, we should go, just to see what the rich orcs eat.”

With that decided, we spent hours getting ready. Vida did not know much about high society in ice orc culture. But she knew a few mannerisms she could relay to me. Most of her focus was on helping solidify my backstory. I needed to be as obscure as possible while still showing I had knowledge.

Our biggest concern was if the morphing charms were discovered. Because of that, it was decided only Vida would accompany me to the dinner. My shape change ability should be undetectable to anyone under tier three. Then, it was a waiting game as the sunset. From the small balcony, the white and green moons lit the streets. It was a strange beauty. I could see a commotion down the street as a steam-powered vehicle thudded and stopped below the balcony. I guess my ride was here.