Chapter 78

I looked for an explanation. Danila thankfully explained it to me, “The beastkin are bounty hunters in the transit.”

Concerned, I asked, “Are they looking for Eilina?”

She shook her head, “It is unlikely. They fly over every month or so. I will connect with the trees and track them. If they land, we will hide in Kiri’s tree.”

“When will we know? How long do you usually hide if they land?” I asked anxiously.

Danila said seriously, “If they land, we will hide until they leave. They could be getting water or camping. Maybe two or three days.” I panicked and gathered my things. I was flying to Europe in a little over twenty-four hours.

“What can you tell me about the beastkin?” I said as I put on my backpack and made for the door.

Laith entered the house being recalled from his hunt, but it was Borseen who spoke, “The ship I saw was a transit skiff. It runs on the ambient aether and holds maybe twenty beastkin. The skiff is slow and flies about twice as fast as a man can run. It is maybe five miles away.”

Danila interrupted, “It is angling toward your cave entrance Caleb. It looks like they may be planning to investigate or use the portal. They could fly over it, but my tree sense says they are slowing down.” I swore and ran out the door.

I had my tetsubos in each hand as I pumped my legs. Should I try to beat them there or stay in hiding with the elves? Right now, I thought I was fairly fast and could beat them there. As long as I got in the cave before them, I could reach the portal and return.

The trees flashed by, and annoyed giant squirrels chittered at me as I hurdled logs in an attempt to take the most direct route. I started to climb the rocky slope and kept looking back at the trees as I ascended. When I finally was far enough up the slope that I was above the tree line, I noticed the skiff.

It was maybe a mile away and getting closer. My incubus sight saw a number of excited beastkin on the deck. I didn’t take much time to figure out which species as I redoubled my effort to make the cave. I started to hear echos, and beams of energy started to strike around me. What the fuck? No warning? Just start shooting at the human on the rocks?

I moved to zig zag as much as I felt comfortable as I didn’t want to slow my progress. I crested the slope to the cave entrance and peeked behind me. They were still at least a half mile back. I had a clearer look at the skiff. It looked like a football cut in half with people scrambling on top. A half dozen aether rifle bolts struck around me. I suspected they were not aiming at me directly based on where they were striking. They were just being assholes and trying to scare me. Well, fuck them, it worked. I rushed into the cave and moved among the stalagmites. They would quickly lose their line of sight on me.

It didn’t stop them from firing into the dark cave, causing it to light up in flashes. I was halfway to the portal when the chamber was lit up by a flare. The flare hung in the air and remained, giving daylight to the entire chamber. I noticed one lizard on the massive dome ceiling and a half dozen crabs scurrying on the ceiling for cover from the light. I reached the portal and was prepared to leave, but I waited, heaving to catch my breath.

I moved to my mind space and looked at my board. Not a single freaking ranged option. I was definitely going to get myself an aether pistol or rifle next time I was at the Bazaar. I did have enough essence for an upgrade. I selected Abyssal Endurance. The loss of the life essence and the corresponding burn through my body was worth it. I returned to the cave and listened.

I could hear the bounty hunter’s voices echoing across the cave. They were cautious and did not enter. I didn’t understand the language; they were too far away to hear clearly anyway. I waited behind a stalagmite within arms reach of the portal. I wanted to know why they were here.

Thirty minutes later and they started firing their rifles at the ceiling. They were targeting the crabs. A large lizard tried to flee but was quickly brought down with focus fire, and it crashed from the ceiling to the floor. They were moving systematically through the massive chamber, and the voices I heard did not sound happy. Were they here to harvest the monsters? Or were they here for the portal?

I figured I couldn’t garner any useful intel without putting myself at risk since I didn’t understand the language. I would have to borrow Vida’s translation device in the future or get my own. When they were about 200 yards from me, I opened the portal and stepped through. I had my clubs ready to whack anything that followed and breathed relief when the tear in reality to the transit closed.

*Well, that fucking sucks.* I told myself. How long were those bounty hunters going to remain? Did they even know about the portal located in the large chamber? I also didn’t like getting shot at! Going into the transit by myself wasn’t too smart but also a blessing as I wouldn’t have been able to escape as quickly if I had anyone else with me. If the bounty hunter’s were just harvesting the cave, they might be upset since the crabs were mostly gone.

Then again, we never explored the entire cave. The cave could extend further into the mountain and even descend into the earth. I walked slowly to my car. I had life essence spending regret. I wished I had waited and upgraded my wings after returning. After running so hard and being out of breath, I just figured to improve my fitness. Well, the only thing I could do now was just harvest more life essence.

My maximum life essence had moved to 170, so I was moving closer to being able to advance to upper tier 2 in some abilities. I started my car and called Paige on my Apollyon phone.

“Hey bro, I am at Iris’ house. Where are you?” She asked immediately. “Iris wouldn’t tell me.”

“Hi, Paige. I was just running an errand. I will be there soon,” I said.

I undressed and left my transit items in the garage. When I entered the house, I regained some of my composure. There was Christmas music playing and a large spread of cookies, and everyone was playing Pictionary. Paige looked up from her team and smiled, “Abigail did everything.”

I joined them in the fun, and Mary showed up shortly after me to join in. It was a very fun and relaxing evening. It was one of the better Christmas’ I had experienced. Paige didn’t have time to ask questions, but she had a lot of fun. Paige admitted she was going to spend all her free time at Iris’ house until she had to join her rowing team for training.

We spent some time with our parents when we got home before heading upstairs. Paige came into my room and asked, “Where did you actually go, Caleb?” Paige had her legs crossed on my bed.

I smiled and said, “I went to visit Kiri’s and Eilina’s mother. Her name is Dalina. I just wanted to let her know they were doing well. I actually found out why Eilina needs protecting.” I mused to myself, *but she never told me what was masking her aether core*.

Paige started, “Caleb,” I knew she was serious using my name and by her tone, “I am still taking everything in but thank you. Thank you for trusting me. I want to be a part of this even if I can not learn magic. When you get back, can you take me to the Bazaar and buy me some magic items?”

I looked at her perplexed. Paige grinned, “Your friends told me you were rich now. I can’t believe you didn’t get me something better for Christmas!” She made an attempt to tackle me onto the bed, but I easily parried her.

“Paige, it is late. I want to get some sleep as I am going to be traveling a lot tomorrow.” Paige looked disappointed. Her face brightened, having thought of something.

“Caleb, since you are rich, you should come with me to Hawaii this summer,” Paige was leaving the room but paused, “Don’t forget, bro, I want magic gifts!” She descended the stairs in a good mood. I thought she was pretty well taking her entire world being flipped upside down.

Finally, with some spare aether, I was able to go into my mind space and train with Pandora. Pandora was dressed in cut-off jeans and a tied-off tee shirt. “Hey, Caleb, glad you could stop in. I wanted to ask if you could add a new environment, maybe a beach? And imagine me up some bathing suits? I am sure you have a good idea of some sexy bathing suits,” Pandora said with a sly smile.

“Maybe next time. I came to get some practice. Are you game?” Why was I asking my subconscious if it wanted to practice martial arts with me? And why did my subconscious constantly want to dress in sexy clothes? Did I have an inner drag queen? I did have a feminine side that I was afraid to explore…my succubus form. I pushed back my inner thoughts and spent a few hours sparring with Pandora.

When I was getting ready to return to the real world, Pandora asked, “So, no beach? How about a TV?”

“TV? How does that work in here? Are you able to play things I watch in the real world?” I moved to the bedroom and created a TV on the wall. The screen was blank, and Pandora stood next to me expectantly. I focused, and the screen changed to static.

I tried to remember *A Christmas Story*. It started to play, but the picture wasn’t good. I had seen the movie a dozen times. Why wouldn’t it play in here? I made a DVD player and a shelf for DVDs, but the DVD looked cracked. Maybe this was like books. Only things I had seen after I became an incubus were imported. I went back to the real world, watched the movie Batman on my computer, and then returned to my mind space.

The DVD of the Batman was on the shelf. I put it in the player, and to the delight of Pandora, the movie started to play clearly. While the movie was playing, I wondered if I could add a video from my actual life. I thought about my recent tryst with Dalina. A new DVD appeared on the shelf. I switched the DVD and played the Dalina DVD.

Pandora squealed in delight and jumped on the bed to watch, “If you want to import some more home sex tapes, you can forgo the beach and swimwear.”

“Maybe later. I will try to add some more movies in time. I will work on the beach eventually. Maybe I will add some animals too. Do you get bored in here?” I looked at Pandora.

“Don’t worry, I can’t go insane. But I can process things when you are not here so don’t be afraid to use me,” She said suggestively while lying on the bed.

I returned to my room without saying anything else. I watched a few episodes of the *Big Bang Theory*. That would hopefully keep Pandora entertained. Before I realized it, Paige knocked on my door for breakfast.

The Christmas miracle didn’t last, and we ended up with cereal and coffee. Mom and dad were still frantically packing while Paige offered to take me to see my girlfriend one last time. We took her jeep over, and it was just Iris and Bedelia. Mary had come earlier and taken everyone out to eat. Iris asked, “Caleb, you remember when you said if I ever needed to…all I needed to do was ask.”

Paige looked at Iris and then me, “Go get them, killer!” She slapped me on the back. “I will talk with Bedelia.”

I went upstairs with an eager Iris. We kissed, stripped, and engaged in sex. I used my vortex and only a little bit of saliva. I helped Iris achieve two orgasms before I gave Iris the recall elixir. I only received ten life essence, but Iris was happy. I dressed and went downstairs. Iris followed.

Bedelia clearly looked slightly jealous. Paige just had a massive grin. Iris blushed as we sat down. Paige, never bashful, said, “From the sounds drifting downstairs, my brother did a god job.”

I shook my head in disbelief, “Yeah, what have you two been talking about?” Bedelia pointed her finger straight up, indicating they were talking about us going at it.

I brushed off any embarrassment, “So, Bedelia, Paige wants to visit the Bazaar. Maybe you could take her? Of course, if anything bad happens, you are off the team.” That cooled the conversation, but we talked about the Bazaar until my parents arrived to take me to the airport. Mary never returned with everyone else for me to say goodbye to them.

On the way to the airport, Bedelia sent me a text with the address of the Bazaar in Amsterdam and a note, “Don’t forget to get everyone gifts!”

At the airport, I ran into some problems going through security. My Apollyon passport showed up on x-ray, and I needed to charm the TSA agent quickly. Thankfully nothing came of it rather than my parents asking what took me so long to get through security.

I noticed a familiar face waiting to board the same plane as we were waiting to board. Artica, Jade’s bodyguard, grinned at me and gave me a small wave.

I checked my phone. Jade had texted me on Christmas.

***Sent you a Christmas gift. Artica will show you around Amsterdam.***

Looking at Artica smiling at me, I thought this was going to be a very interesting trip.

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*Rose POV*

*Rose couldn’t believe what had happened in the last 72 hours. When Mary told her magic was real she was shell-shocked and didn’t really believe it. She confided in her mother, and then her mother told her father, who went ballistic.*

*He grilled her for an hour and then called her uncle in Turkey. They talked on the phone well into the night, and Rose started to get scared. He kept mentioning something called the Purists. When her parents started packing the next morning, she called Mary, hoping she could help. She was crying while talking to Mary when her father barged into her room, took her phone, and smashed it.*

*Rose didn’t have the energy or sense of mind to pack, so her mother just shoved everything she could grab into a suitcase, and they drove to an airport. They boarded a private plane, flew to Portugal, refueled, and landed in Turkey.*

*Her father finally explained everything to her. She was the descendant of a secret organization called the Purists. They had been fighting a war for centuries to keep humanity from becoming overwhelmed by werewolves, vampires, witches, and warlocks. Her father admitted he had trained to be an operative but lacked the resolve. Rose’s uncle was an active operative and convinced her father to come back.*

*Rose was shocked to learn that both of her parents sent the organization 20% of their income. They were going to Turkey so Rose could spend the next year being educated by members of the organization. Her mother promised Rose that she would have the opportunity to attend college in the United States, but she was going to spend the next year and a half learning everything she needed to know about the dangers to humans.*

*Rose was devastated. She was certain that if she spent her senior year in Turkey, she wouldn’t be admitted to Ivy colleges. When they landed in Turkey, and her uncle picked them up, she knew her life was forever changed.*