Chapter 42 Meeting Mother Lioness

I had some trepidation training in the basement. The containment runes on the floor were still there even if Iris said they were not charged. Iris came down to watch and as I seemed hesitant to move to the center of the room she goaded me, “Caleb don’t be such a baby. You know the circle isn’t charged. The first time you came rushing in here you didn’t even know containment circles existed! Just continue on that line of thought.” So Iris was definitely not good at burning people. But she did get me to man up and I stepped onto the runes.

The room flashed and I jumped back to a laughing Iris. She had just turned on a second set of lights that tripled the brightness in the room. I looked at Iris trying to get hold of herself while Kiri was waiting patiently for me. When Iris regained her composure I said, “For that act of malevolence you don’t get to play with my magic dick for a year.” Her face fell.

Before Iris could respond Abigail came downstairs with a tray of drinks and mini sandwiches. I went over to Abigail and took one of the drinks and drained it. Unsweetened iced tea. “Do you always eat healthy Abigail?” I asked.

“No, I have one cheat day a week, usually Sunday,” she said with a smile that brightened her face.

“Well since you are my personal chef now you need to know when my cheat days are.” I searched for a good response, “My cheat days are any day of the week with a ‘y’ in it.” Abigail paused and thought about my response for a good five minutes.

Finally, she said, “Every day of the week has an ‘a’ in it?”

I smirked and said, “Exactly!” Iris was still trying to think of a way to correct her error so I turned to Kiri.

Training with Kiri wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.  She was an experienced warrior and started with the basics. Footwork and reacting to your opponent.  Moving out of the way of an attack was my first lesson, dodging.  With my demon enhancements, I had the physical tools to be a good warrior.  After learning the dodge basics I was given two short hammers and we started working on parrying.

The lesson continued for four hours and Kiri said I had just scratched the surface.  Repetition and actual combat would develop my dodge and parry skill.  She reinforced that I was practicing against a humanoid opponent.  Most of my opponents in the transits would be monsters. Fighting monsters would take getting familiar with my weapons and tailoring my attacks to the type of monster.

Kiri had been very patient with me and was an excellent teacher.  I thanked Kiri and planned to come back every night this week for more training. Kiri added, “We should work on some unarmed combat next session. Maybe not with the audience distracting you.”

I looked over at Iris and Abigail. Abigail had praised me the entire time, my own personal cheerleader. Iris hadn’t said much during my training. I faced Kiri, “Sure Kiri, tomorrow night at 11ish?”

“I look forward to it,” Kiri said and went upstairs leaving me with Abigail and Iris.

“She is sorry,” Abigail said speaking for Iris.

I gave Iris a hard stare and then smiled, “It was funny.” I paused dramatically. “Your sentence is reduced to a month.” I walked passed her and up the stairs.

“What about me?” Abigail asked from the bottom of the stairs.

“We are on for Wednesday Abs. I will pick you up for a run at 5:00 am. Decide where you want to go.” I headed to my car and checked my phone. It was 1:00 am.

Paige had sent me a few texts…no it was Ashley using Paige’s phone for the first few before using her own phone. She was asking if I was going to be coming down with Mary next weekend. That was right, Mary was visiting the campus and staying with Paige. I added her phone number to my address book and told her I wouldn’t be joining Mary.

Molly sent me three pictures of dresses she was trying on for the dance and asked me to pick one for her mother to get her. I choose the light blue one and said it went with her eyes. Hopefully, that was the right answer over the black or yellow one.

Mary sent me a very weird text. It read:

***Rose and I were talking. Can you help us train over the winter?***

Rose Melanson was a junior as well. Same height as Mary, about 5’10”. She had very dark hair and caramel skin. I think her mother was Indian…or did she say Persian? I vaguely remember hanging out with her in 7th grade and we talked way back then. She was another one of those overachievers like Mary. Top grades, athlete, do everything at 100%. She had come to my hockey game with Mary and a few other of her teammates as well. But why would they want me to help them train? I wasn’t a personal trainer.

Did I really need another time sink as well? I figured I could get some more life essence from Mary in the future but I had been finding higher-quality options. I texted her back:

***What do you have in mind? I have a small gym in the basement of my house.***

Chloe said she had a great time and would like to do it again. She gave really good massages but the time to go to the city… At least she didn’t have my true identity. I texted her that I would let her know the next time I was in the DC area.

Beatrice texted me and it took me a while to remember that was the college student that I flirted with at Dunkin. My schedule was much too full right now. I told her I was going to Europe for Christmas through New Year’s and would contact her when I got back.

My parents asked when I was going to be home. I texted I was leaving Iris’ house now. They probably thought I went to DC with her anyway. My last text was from Rob. He was all excited that he had kissed Yuki. I texted him back that he was a lady killer and to keep it up.

It had taken me 20 minutes to get through my phone messages. I really needed a secretary. Maybe Abigail would do it. On better thought she might text something to someone I didn’t want to be known. I didn’t think there was anyone right now that I could trust to be my personal secretary.

I finally drove home. My parents were asleep and I made my way up to my room quietly. I found a note under my door addressed to me. I fell onto my bed and opened it.

*Caleb,*

*Thank you. I would have seen you again but everyone was pressing Ashley. I hope to see you again soon. ♥Maya*

The letter smelled strongly of her perfume. The heart by her name…was she saying she loved me? No. It had to just be something she did when she signed her name. She would have written out the word love if that was what she meant. I was just glad my mother hadn’t found the note.

I showered and got my clothes ready for tomorrow. I had my practice clothes, my school clothes, and finally the outfit I planned to wear to go and meet Jade’s mother. I guess that was something I had to do. I did my nightly routine, sleep in my mind space, practice aether manipulation, do some course modules online, and study Latin in my mind space.

When it came time to go to practice I headed downstairs to find my dad already up. “Caleb I wanted to talk with you.”

“Sure thing dad. What’s up?” I asked guessing this was not a simple conversation.

“Well, your mother and I think you are doing too much. You come home late almost every night and barely get any sleep.” He said solemnly. I decided to quell his concerns.

“Oh, I have been taking naps at Iris’. I feel fine. My grades are improving and I am taking online classes so I can get back the year I lost,” I told him.

“We are just worried you may burn yourself out Caleb. You are juggling a few female friends and…” I stopped him.

“They are just friends dad. Iris and I are semi-serious. Everyone else is just a friend,” I said. I almost added ‘friends with benefits’ but I wanted to alleviate my parent's worries.

“Well if you need someone to talk to don’t be afraid to talk with me or your mother,” he said with concern still in his voice. I had always had an open exchange with my parents in the past but since becoming an incubus I had kept quite a bit from them. I was trying to avoid outright lying to them.

“Sure thing dad. Don’t worry I am having the time of my life,” I said and gave him a hug before heading out.

Hockey practice was rough. Coach Sam was hard on us and I found out from James that her husband had video evidence of her cheating on him. The only good news was the video was of a player who graduated last year so he wasn’t underage. It was still making the divorce proceedings difficult for her as the judge was sympathetic to her husband. It was not my problem. Sam had made her bed and now had to sleep in it.

I showered at home after practice and had to rehash the same conversation I had with dad with mom. They were concerned parents. I told her the same thing I told dad. Rob honked the horn as I was now late which allowed me to break away.

Rob regaled me with tales of his date and first kiss. Sophia just rolled her eyes in the back seat. At school, I walked in and Mandy came up to me. “Dinner will be at 6:30pm. Don’t be late.” James hadn’t said anything at practice and had probably lost favor with his family after I turned down the Sunday invitation.

“I will be there and I will be on time Mandy. Just make sure the food is good,” I said trying to add some levity to the conversation. She just walked away. I really didn’t like her. Her arrogance just seemed to rub me the wrong way.

My day went fine until English class. I tripped over my own two feet when I saw Molly. She must have lost a few pounds and not slept for a few days. I hastily sat next to her and took her hand and ended my charm effect. She was smiling at me the whole time. “Hey, Molly how are you feeling?” I asked.

“Good! I finished both the English and Math texts. Are you proud of me?” She replied.

“Very proud Molly. You should get some sleep when you get home though.” Even with my charm broken she was still transfixed on me. I couldn’t believe it had lasted and been so strong. Maybe Molly didn’t have very strong mental defenses against it. Either way, this was on me. I needed to be careful or I might hurt someone.

We talked about the dance during class and the dress I selected. She was picking it up Friday and couldn’t wait for the dance. She was going to be disappointed though. I decided I would not have sex with any woman who was younger than me. After I turned 18 I would make sure my partners were at least 18. I needed to be a better person and I hoped this vow would help.

I left school during the last period and texted Rob he needed to take the bus home. At home, I started getting nervous so cleaned the bedrooms and bathrooms on the second floor. I could tell which sheets Maya and Ashley had slept on and which towels they had used with my enhanced senses.

I decided to wear my Armani suit to dinner tonight. Iris texted me but I told her I was going alone. If I was going to screw this up I would do it on my own. My dad got home and I told him I had dinner at James’ house from my hockey team. It was a formal dinner which is why I was wearing a suit. He nodded and asked when I would be back. I told him I was going to sleep at Iris’ house after dinner. He seemed to want to say something but ended up just asking me to text them when I got to Iris’ house tonight.

My drive over felt ominous. Should I be going? Was something bad going to happen? Was I being stupid? Should I have pushed for a neutral site like a restaurant? Yes, that last one would have been smart.

I was buzzed in through the gates and a valet was there. My eyes told me he was catkin. I parked my own car and kept my keys ignoring the valet. I walked up to the door and it swung inwards. A catkin in a butler uniform had opened the door, “Mister Silversmith. Please follow me.”

I buried my concerns and drew on my demon cockiness. I followed him to the dining room. It was 6:26 pm so I was not late. At the table were Jade, Mandy, James, and three older catkin. The older woman at the head of the table had to be Jade’s mother. Her catkin form mirrored Jade’s albeit older. I ended my abyssal eyes and saw the woman’s human form.

She looked to be in her forties was only a few gray hairs. She was dressed richly and had on a heavy gold necklace and diamond earrings. My enhanced sight could easily see these details from across the room. Looking at the woman she fit what I imagined a royal duchess would be like. Soon lengthy interdictions were made. The other catkin were James’ and Mandy’s parents.

They both looked slightly subdued. Like they were given up their house temporarily to a superior. I wish I understood the catkin hierarchy better. Jade’s mother was at the head of the table with the two older catkin to her right and left. Both Mandy and James sat next to their father. Jade sat next to her aunt. Next to Jade was a place setting for me I guessed. I walked into the room and sat at the head of the table opposite Jade’s mother.

All eyes had been on me and some startled eyes followed me as I sat. The butler came up to me and started to say, “Mister Silversmith we have prepared…”

“It is fine Gerrault. You can move his place setting.” So focused on me. “May I call you Caleb?” Her tone was too polite. I felt like she was a dangerous predator luring her prey into complacency.

“That is fine. And what should I call you madam?” I thought my tone was calm and even.

James’ eyes were looking at me in a warning. Jade’s eyes seemed amused though so I knew I hadn’t overstepped yet. Mandy and her parents were just studying me. “Agatha Corleonis.” She said. I had been studying Latin and openly smiled.

“Corleonis. Is that Latin for Heart of the Lion?” I asked sipping the water that had been moved before me.

Agatha’s eyes arched in surprise, “It is.” I switched to my abyssal eyes to see a grinning cat woman opposite me. Agatha looked at Jade briefly before focusing back on me. “So Caleb my daughter tells me you can open portals to the transits.” James and his parent’s eyes were open in shock as they looked at me anew. Mandy just looked smug having already guessed this.

Jade had revealed this to her mother. How much had Jade told her? I didn’t want to get caught in a lie so decided to confirm as little as possible, “Yes, I have the means to open portals.” The soup was brought out to the table with a salad by two attractive maids. I guessed they were more attendants of Agatha’s.

Everyone started eating but I just sipped my water. I doubted the food was drugged but I wasn’t really hungry. It was some time before Agatha asked her next question, “My nephew, niece, and daughter say you are a phenomenal athlete.” Well, that wasn’t a question so I could ignore it but that might be too rude.

I decided to deflect without lying, “Not really. Just magically enhanced.” If Jade had told her mother I was a human mage that should be a palatable answer for her. Agatha just gave a curt nod.

“And you took my daughter into a transit?” She asked directly. I had reclined in my chair abandoning my food and water.

“Yes, we explored a portal. Have you ever been inside the transit?” I asked Agatha. I wasn’t going to be the only one getting asked questions.

Agatha had barely touched the soup and salad and waved for the maids to take them away before answering, “Yes. I have made thirty-two ventures into the transit. All in my younger years.”

An opening for flattery before me I said, “It couldn’t have been that long ago then.” I had a smile on my face and watched Agatha wallow in the compliment that she looked young. She eyed Jade for a moment before asking her next question.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what is your affiliation?” she asked as the servants brought out large plates filled with a steak, green beans, and mashed potatoes. It was a simple meal but definitely restaurant quality. The catkin eyes the steak but made no move on the meat, waiting on Agatha who was waiting on me.

I needed to be careful here. I wished I knew more about the different factions out there. Technically I was part of Andromeda’s faction but I definitely couldn’t say that. I formulated my response, “On Earth, I have no affiliation. I do have some patrons on the higher levels but will not reveal them.” I hoped this was good. I hope what Agatha interpreted was that I was no threat to her or her family but you shouldn’t mess with me because I have powerful friends.

Agatha digested my answer and then cut into her meat. Everyone else followed. I just sipped my water. Agatha offered, “You should try the meat. It is loin from a frost bear. It costs $5,000 per steak.” So she was showing off her wealth with the statement. Was Jade rich by extension?

I decided to try the meat. I cut a slice and it was medium rare. I chewed it and it tasted like steak but it melted in my mouth was a few chews. Definitely good steak. “It is excellent Agatha.” I ate half the steak, about 10 ounces before pushing the plate away indicating I was done. The catkin had long finished their steaks and eyed my half-finished steak, following the plate out of the room.

“Jade, Caleb, and I will take dessert in your study,” Agatha said rising. Jade followed her mother and I followed Jade. Mandy looked jealous as I left while her parents looked relieved. The dinner wasn’t a disaster.

The study had an assortment of modern novels and older books. It was impressive but I didn’t gawk and just focused on Agatha and Jade. Jade fell into a leather chair. Agatha waited for her butler to bring a tray with white drinks and finger-shaped cookies.

“It is fermented sphinx milk Caleb. Very expensive and extremely rare. It would be a slight to me if you didn’t drink it.” At least she hadn’t said how much it had cost. I picked up the vial-shaped glass and knocked back the drink. It coated my esophagus like Pepto-bismal but tasted like honey-vanilla cream with a kick of alcohol. Jade and her mother drank theirs.

“I see by your face you liked the beverage. Good. Now that was are alone I hope you can answer the questions on why I traveled 4,000 miles to meet you,” she said with a toothy cat smile.

“I have been accommodating to this point Agatha. If it is in my interest I will tell you but I will not freely answer all your questions,” I said plainly. A short growl came from Agatha and she quickly got it under control. Jade looked a little worried by her mother’s growl.

Finally, Agatha said, “Fair. Jade hasn’t told me much about your trek into the portal. But my cousins did some testing on Jade. Her aether core has been altered and I confirmed this when I arrived yesterday.” She hadn’t asked a question so I just kept eye contact. She added, “What did you do to my daughter?”