Chapter 153 The Whispering Rock Clan

The steam-powered car was large, and a dozen men exited from the back.  Vida was next to me, “Honor guard.  Twelve means they hold you in the highest regard.”  I just nodded, but it felt like they sent enough orc soldiers, so I could not escape.

Six orc guards in dark gray uniforms remained by the vehicle, and the other six entered.  I could hear the commotion below as they entered and thundered up the steps, announcing their arrival with gusto.  I opened the door before they had a chance to knock.  I was dressed in all-black combat attire for the transit.  The lead guard crossed his arms across his chest, palms open, a greeting of respect.  Vida said it meant he had no faith in his ability to beat me in a fight. His eyes told me he wouldn’t mind trying.

I motioned Vida toward me.  The lead guard stepped forward, “Only you were invited, Champion.  Your followers can remain here.”

I was getting the idea this was not going to go well.  I looked at Vida, who shook her head in that I should not argue.  I had planned to take it her with me, not that she had been doing a great job guiding us.  “Fine.  I will attend alone.”  I turned to everyone else.  “Everyone stays in the room, and no one leaves for any reason.  Bedelia…you know what to do.”  She nodded and would be spying on me with her spells.

The air was strangely calm as I followed the guards to their vehicle.  The vehicle was closer to a tank than a car.  There appeared to be three compartments.  The rear had eight of the guards, and the front housed the other six and the driver. The center compartment was for the passenger, and the massive seat could sit four of me comfortably abreast.  I guessed the vehicle was almost fifteen feet wide and thirty feet long.  It took up half the street as I entered.

The center compartment smelled of alcohol and leather.  The fat ice orc that had presented the invitation to me was seated inside.  “Champion Apollyon, please sit so we may depart.”

I stepped up and noticed the ceiling was low and confining. It was not made for orcs of my size.  A guard slammed the door, and soon, the steam vehicle was moving.  It was a lot quieter inside than I had expected.  The orc servant started talking, “Dinner will be served after your discussion with Clan Leader Gundella.”

“What will we be discussing?”  I inquired.

“What benefits the clan can offer you, of course.  The Whispering Stone Clan is the wealthiest clan in a thousand miles.  You have made a smart decision to meet with us first. Gundella will make sure it is not necessary to meet the others,” the servant said confidently.

I sat comfortably but wondered why such importance was placed on looks in orc society.  I was definitely about six inches taller than the average orc and wider and thicker than most.  Muscles did not always win a fight.  Speed, intelligence, and awareness all played a significant role.  My escort was taking a long route through the city, and the vehicle arrived on the far side of the city.  I assumed the flashy pickup and drive meant showing the people and other clans where I was going.  The windows on the transport were left open so anyone could see inside and identify me. It was almost like they were claiming me as their property.

The manor we stopped at was more like a small medieval castle with the same black obsidian coating the exterior that was seen a lot in the city.  It gave the residence a surreal, dark look, and villainous look to my human perception.  My escort of a dozen formed around me and marched me to the front door.  An ancient, wrinkly ice orc woman opened the door, stood, and took me in.  Even though her face looked ancient, her shoulders looked strong, and her forearms were thick.  The fat servant was behind me and introduced us, “Clan Leader Gundella, I present you Champion Apollyon, unaffiliated warrior.”

The old woman sniffed like she was unimpressed or maybe it meant something else in orc culture.  She turned and entered the house, expecting me to follow.  I climbed the black glass steps and entered the castle.  The twelve guards remained outside and spread along the perimeter.  The hallway just inside the massive oak and iron doors was pristine white, a contrast to the exterior.  It was not marble but some other stone.  It was a long hallway, and the Clan Leader was already halfway down it as she had not waited for me. Maybe some sort of dominance play.

I walked slowly, not wanting to be rushed and assert some control.  The walls featured massive pictures of ice orcs fighting monsters, ice orcs fighting dark-skinned orcs, and a few scenes of carnal orgies of ice orcs taking every breed of orc and humanoid I was aware of—and some I wasn’t.  Each painting was to show the ice orcs’ dominance over everything around them.

I turned into the same archway Gundella had to find a small library with a single window.  There was a shelf of books on two of the four walls. She was seated on one of two chairs facing each other in the center of the room.  My abyssal sight was active, and the archway had some runic markings.  It was not a containment array, but I did not recognize it.  I stepped into my mind space quickly for advice.

I was moved to the library, and Lilith had an answer.  “It is a pattern that will nullify all aether devices. Your orc form is safe, but I am not sure about the sphere concealing your aether core’s tier. It will not damage the sphere but may make it inactive for a short time.  I identified what powered the runic circle. It was a bowl filled with aether crystal powder. You just need to move the bowl to deactivate the runes.”

I thanked Lilith and returned.  I had only been gone for a dozen seconds, but it had seemed like I had hesitated in the real world.  I entered the library and felt my faux core push like mild indigestion.  The array was not powerful enough to disrupt it, and it still functions normally.  I was also still in my orc body, and my shapeshifted form had not been disturbed.  I moved and sat across from Gundella.  She steppeled her hands and studied me more intently.

I remained quiet and patient and waited on her, “Why my city?” She finally asked.

She wondered why I had chosen to join a clan here. Vida said the southern continent had the more impressive cities.  I knew this was not a desirable place to settle by her tone.  “I have not chosen it.  I am keeping my options open while I travel.  Maybe someplace will lure me to stay,” I said while crossing my arms across my chest in a show of indifference.  At least, I hoped that was what it meant to her.

The old orc smirked slightly, “Tell me, what do you want to lure you here? You obviously have the old blood in your veins.  I wish it to permeate my clan.”

I was slightly lost about the old blood comment, so I went for levity, “You look a little old to be bearing my children, Clan Leader.”

She gave a harsh chuckle, “Do not tempt me to show you that I can bust your seed out of you with my skills!  I may not be fertile any longer, but I can collect and send it along with my shamans to one who is.”

I almost wanted to take the old orc up on her offer and just resist while she spent herself trying.  Instead, I was nice, “I know you could.  How much old blood runs in your clan?”  I asked, trying to get an answer about what old blood meant. Vida had never mentioned it, but she was also uneducated and young when she came to Earth.

The old woman relaxed in her chair, but it seemed uncomfortable to her all of a sudden.  “None in two generations have demonstrated the traits of the old blood.  Our shamans have identified thirty-seven women with the old blood in their veins. No males have manifested the traits, but a few carry the blood.”  Her words were heavy—almost sorrowful.  I still did not understand how, just by my looks, I was considered old blood.  From the way she was talking, it was definitely a genetic heritage.

“Not an insignificant number,” I hedged, unsure if my statement was true.  “I have heard of higher numbers in other clans, though.”  It was a bluff, but I was sure it was true based on her body language.

Gundella tensed as she gripped her chair tightly.  “You are welcome to seed all twenty-seven with the blood markers in Whispering Rock, even those that are already mated to another.  After dinner, I will present them to you.  A few are still arriving from our operations in towns further away.”

I nodded, and it gave me time to think.  It seemed she was really pulling out the red carpet for me.  I understood genetics from my high school biology texts.  If the old blood trait was recessive and only demonstrated in males, it must be on both the X and Y chromosomes.  That was if orcs had a similar DNA makeup as humans.  If they had women who detected the trait with magic, then they must have it on one or both of their X chromosomes.  So, that would mean that…half the males and half the females would demonstrate the traits?  But if only XY males demonstrated it, then I could guess, “So are you guaranteeing a quarter of my progeny would demonstrate the old blood traits?”

Gundella scoffed, “A quarter?  Not unless you are pure blood yourself; otherwise, maybe one in thirty-two of your sons.”  Gundella stood and paced, sensing she was losing my interest.  I learned some valuable information:  one in sixty-four children might be genetic somehow.  “You could go to a larger clan, but know that you will be treated well here.  I am even prepared to name you my partner and give the clan to your care on my death if you sire at least,” she paused, calculating, “five of the old blood.”

She wanted me to sire three hundred children to get five male orcs with the appearance of the old blood!? I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, pretending to think it over.  I was actually going to my mind space.  Hopefully, to get some answers.  Everyone except Calypso was in the library.  Pandora was only wearing a black negligee.  She spoke first, “The old blood is an ancient orc race.  We found references to them on the higher layers, starting around the twentieth layer.  They often do not appear on the lower layers because they have lower tier two cores or are stronger.”

Lilith added, “The features from the book you used are what defines them.  Six foot six and taller, the cranial shape, shoulder width…  you basically copied one for your body.  They may get a little upset if they find out your core is only 0.69.”

I nodded. That was right; my obfuscation core from Telmerius set my core to read much lower.  “Why are there no females of the old blood?”

A lot of looking around the room at each other for an answer was broken by Nashima, “There are females of the old blood, but my guess is their appearance is not distinctive like the male’s size.”  The feathered couatl was in her humanoid form, covered in fine feathers. “They are extremely violent, what they call the old blood orcs.  They also were not just the pale ice orcs but all skin tones.  They were at the heart of most wars in my ancestral memory.  Sometimes starting them or just joining later for the glory of the fight as mercenaries. They love battle like a drug.”

“So why are they so scarce on Mercanious?”  I asked my mind space of scholars.  I was glad all the books I had downloaded from Rincewind were useful.

“Same as why there are very few tier two human mages on Earth.  They are just rare.  And most migrate to higher layers when they realize getting closer to the Source helps them live longer, and they can regenerate their aether faster,” Lilith explained.

“I understand.  I guess I am just missing why my appearance immediately qualifies me as one of these old blood orcs,” I said, getting ready to leave.

“They might just think you have some of the traits which are good enough for them.  There were a lot of books in Rincewind’s library about humans trying to breed higher-tier cores throughout history.  Selective breeding usually never works as the genetic pool eventually gets too small, and before you know it, you and fucking your sister,” Lilith said with a flourish.  She was taking a jab at me, so I left my mind space.

I was again seated across from Gundella.  I had no aspirations to concede to her overtures.   I stood, “You said I was invited to dinner?  Some food so I can think.”  I couldn’t even have children anyway, and when I unlocked the ability, my children would be part demon.

The fat ice orc opened the door, as he had been listening the entire time. I was actually curious about the books in her library.  The language was unknown to me, but Lilith could translate them with time.  I paused and looked longingly at the knowledge.  Gundella asked, “You read Apollyon?” She said it with some condescension.

I retaliated at her in rebuke of my mental prowess, “Quite a lot, actually.  I came down the mountains and through one of your mining towns.  I read the mayor’s books after I kicked him out so I could rest.  The mayor was skimming wages from the workers and shorting shipments as well. One of your towns, I presume?” I said with a smile.

“Which town?” She asked stiffly.

“Iron Splinter,” I informed her, still smiling.  Her eyes hardened.

“If you do not mind, dinner will be delayed while I send out some men to confirm.  You can remain here and enjoy the books.”  Gundella stormed out of the library.  I was surprised she believed me so easily.  It was Lilith who had decoded the ledgers, and I was sure she was correct.

I scanned the books on both walls, and none of the titles were in a language I understood.  I should have purchased a charm to read other languages. I just started scanning books one at a time, paging through them quickly.  I only got through five books before the fat servant returned, “Dinner is prepared.”

The dining room was the same white stone as throughout the interior of the castle. It made the lighting keep to the room extremely bright.  A black wood table sat in the center of the large room.  It could seat just six, and I guessed it was for intimacy as the place settings were just at both ends.  That was not all that attracted my attention in the room.  Gundella was inspecting a row of ice orc women along one wall.  They were all naked from the chest up.  From the waist down, they had loose fabric skirts with leather belts holding them.

I counted thirty-two, all of the childbearing ages.  Gundella looked up, “Some are late, but I want to show you what our clan is offering you.”  She offered a toothy smile.  I checked the cores of the orc women, and all were at least 0.4 in strength.  The strongest was 0.6, and she was the youngest, younger than even Vida.

Gundella finished her inspection and took a seat. My position at the table was facing the long row to serve as a constant reminder.  Some of the women were nervous, others angry, others indifferent.  Gundella had also pulled them from different facets of life, as some were scared warriors, others were fleshy house servants, and others were laborers with thin, muscled bodies and calloused hands.  I sat, and the meal began with a heavy wine.  It was potent and fruity.  The food was, as Aurora had mentioned, excellent.  The orcs must have good taste buds, as the seasoning was near perfect.  I was sure Vida would have enjoyed the food.

As we finished the meal, Gundella asked, “Would you like to inspect or sample any of the clan’s women?”  I nodded, playing along.

Two more had arrived during dinner to bring the number to thirty-four.  I was confused about how they were willing to be paraded in front of a stranger. The Matriarch must hold a lot of power in the Clan.  I walked the long row slowly, looking down at them as none were taller than six feet.  All their skin was white or slightly off-white.  The younger females had firm breasts, but the older ones, who obviously had birthed some children, had begun to sag.

I looked each of them in the eye to get an idea of their temperament. Some looked away, some met my eyes with ferocity, and some with a willingness. I was starting to become tempted as the life essence harvest would be immense. Raising these women’s core would make them stronger as well. I took a step back.

“I think I would prefer to spend the evening in your library. Maybe tomorrow we can resume negotiations?” I offered.

“Will you be staying the night then?” Gundella asked, somewhat surprised.

It must signify something, staying the night. “Perhaps. For now, I want to read.” The fat orc escorted me to the library, and I was left alone. I just hoped this was worth it. I would hate if I found out every book I added was orc poetry.