Chapter 135 Thinking Like an Incubus

I was in and out of the Bazaar quickly.  A young man in a suit presented a wooden box with the doppelganger ribs inside to me and thanked me for my purchase.  The box was ebony wood and well-crafted.  I returned to the Pathfinder and let Kiri drive to the meeting place.  I would use the short drive to add another construct to my mind space.

As we safely exited the city, I assimilated the box and contents and slipped into my mind space.  The pedestal room was empty, and I found almost everyone in the library.   Lilith noticed me and spoke, “Casper is sunning himself in the park, and Calypso is playing in the water.”

“I will not be long,” I held up the ebony box I had assimilated into my mind space.  I opened the box, and inside were four medium-sized brilliant white ribs.  I only needed one of the ribs, so I removed one and placed the ebony box on the shelf in the library.

The constructs were very interested in the proceedings. Pandora and Nashima joined Lilith as they circled around me.  I turned the bone in my hand.  It was heavy like metal, and the white ivory coloring was bright white like snow, “Doppelgangers must have different bones than humans.”

Nashima responded to my statement, “Shapechangers store a lot of their mass in their bones.  It allows them to morph into larger creatures without losing much mass.  So you are ready to add a new member to our community?”  Her tone was laced with black humor.

I could tell Nashima was still bitter about being trapped in my mind space.  I looked over at Lilith, “How is your progress with making the projection a reality?”

Lilith frowned at the question, “It is not that simple.  I told you that.  The most important factor is making sure the construct is still tied to your mind space.  I could make a ritual circle now and send a construct to the real world.  But the construct would dissipate after the invested aether runs out and cannot return to the mind space—it would be destroyed.  I am basically creating an entirely new ritual.”

“Okay, just keep working on it,” I dropped the topic and focused on the rib in my hand.  I focused on the rib and created a new construct from the material. It dissolved in my hand.  I was not expecting the humanoid that formed before me.  A tall, dark gray-skinned feminine body stood erect before me.  She had no hair and looked—unattractive.  Her bones were visible, and besides breasts, she was absent of genitalia.

Pandora inspected her, “She looks like a one.  Maybe a two if she smiled. No, I am being too generous, definitely not even a one.”

I ignored her comments and prepared to instill the life essence into the construct.  I wanted this construct to embody my humanity.  I focused on my love for my parents.  The bond I had with my sister.  My protective nature for Abigail.  My past friendship with Rob.  My willingness to help Iris find her parents. All the good things I associated with being compassionate and caring human.

The essence was invested, and the doppelganger blinked and looked around in a slow circle.  She turned back to me, and her body transformed into my mother.  My jaw did not work, and I finally said, “No.  No, not that.  Never be her ever again in here.”  The doppelganger switched back to her natural form.

I inhaled as I felt the oppression from what my mother might think of me if she knew what I was and did. “You are here to serve as a body double for me so I can change my clothes when needed.”  The doppelganger switched into a body that mirrored mine—albeit naked.

It was my adult Caleb’s body, and I was actually impressed with it, and so was Pandora, “It is about time!  The estrogen levels in here were off the chart!”  Unabashedly, Pandora got down on her knees to inspect the doppelganger’s resting phallus.  She looked up into the eyes of the new construct, “You are my new favorite person!  What is your name?”

I answered, “Aria, it means change in Italian.  I looked it up before coming in here, but if you are going to be in my male body, maybe we should come up with something else,”  I rationalized.

The doppelganger spoke for the first time, and it was a little spooky with her looking like me, “I like the name Aria. My genetic predisposition is for the female.”

Lilith educated us on doppelgangers: “The doppelganger species have male and female members but do not mate with each other. Instead, the males will mimic a species and impregnate females while the females of the species do the same to get impregnated. The children appear like the species they were born as until they reach puberty, and then they can assume their doppelganger bodies.”

Pandora groaned, “You mean this will not work for her?” She slapped the phallus in front of her which swung nicely.

“It should,” Lilith replied. “The book I read said doppelgangers could mimic either sex, but their reproduction was limited by their own.”

I shook my head at Pandora, “Okay, we can stick with Aria for your name.  Now, how does the clothes exchange work?”  I directed my question at Nashima.

Nashima finished looking at the new addition, “Just make the clothes you want easily accessible to Aria and give her access to your live feed.  Aria will handle the rest when you send her a request.”

I made a large walk-in closet off the bedroom in the mind space.  As I was making it, Pandora also wanted one for her clothes, so I added a separate walk-in.  I ignored her request to add more for her clothes to the midspace at this time.  I had too many things going on in the real world to be playing dress up with my mind constructs.

I returned to the passenger seat in the Pathfinder, and it was not long before we reached the dance studio.  There were a fair number of bodyguards outside the studio, mostly wolfkin, but I also noticed two elves in the mix as well.

Kiri was at my hip as we walked into the building.  A wolfkin directed us upstairs and radioed that we were coming.  The dance room had two mirror walls and one floor-to-ceiling glass wall looking out into the park behind the building.

Three wolfkin in suits stood guard at the door.  A table was set in the middle of the hardwood floor.  The table was a triangle.  Dakkon sat on one edge, and a young woman in her twenties on the other edge.  My abyssal sight told me the other was an elf, and I assumed this was Constance Alarian.  I sat at the the other free edge of the triangle table, Kiri stood directly behind me.  Dakkon smiled at me, “Glad I could facilitate this meeting.  Constance this Apollyon Silverhorn.  He was integral in the recent slaying of the aboleth.”

The elf woman stiffened, and I could tell she was already uncomfortable.  Examining her core, she was weaker than the elf mage I had captured in her team.  I guessed she was upper tier one…maybe 0.7 in core strength.  She spoke, “I am sorry for interfering with you, Apollyon.  I am here to give recompense and gain the freedom of my men.” It appeared Dakkon had prepped her before talking with me. She was already giving me the advantage.

I was a little shocked as I had figured we were going to be negotiating here, and she had already capitulated.  I thought to get answers, “Miss Alaire,” my use of her true last name made her tense, “I am curious why you are on Earth.  Isn’t this layer below your family’s concerns?”

Dakkon looked very interested in her answer, and I was a little irritated with his presence.  She did not speak and instead went into thought, holding her response, so I asked, “Does it have anything to do with your brother, Bastian?”

Her face clouded in anger, and I smiled tightly as I had struck a nerve.  “What do you know of my brother?” was her response laced with anger.

I could tell she thought I was an ally of Bastian or at least on good terms with him.  I gave her some relief, “I know Bastian is a malicious bastard.  I have no love for your brother.   I have not made up my mind about you.”

Realization washed her face, “I apologize if my tone offended you.”  She relaxed.  “My brother orchestrated my exile here with my twenty-three most loyal followers.  You have thirteen of them in custody, according to Mister Duskwalker.  I would very much like to pay for their release and promise not to interfere in your business again.” She was mainly here to secure the elves I had captured.

I crossed my legs, put my hands in my lap, and asked, “Tell me more about your brother Bastian.  If this goes well, I can see all your agents being released without prejudice.”

Constance gathered herself, “I am the fifth of five children.  Bastian is the second.  He is three hundred years my senior, but our parents favored me as the youngest.  I was given the city of Pasturian to govern.” She explained, “It is in the transit between the 21st and 22nd layer on the thread of Earth.  I ruled for thirty years before my brother used his agents to cause trouble in the city.”  Her fists clenched in anger as her knuckles turned white.

“Were you a fair and just ruler?  I have heard the Alaire’s prefer a dictatorship style of governance,” I asked a question while she seethed, remembering whatever her brother had done.

She looked at me, trying to gauge her response.  “No,” she finally admitted.  “I ruled as I was taught.  Show strength and stamp out challenges to your authority.  It is an effective method and how my family has been in power for millennia.” Her response rang true to my truth sense ability.

“I heard your family power comes from artifacts made from the cores of your children.  Is that why you are searching for descendants on Earth?” I asked directly.  Dakkon was growing more than fascinated with the conversation; if popcorn was available, he would be eating it.

Constance shifted uneasily and nodded, “Yes.  That is true.  Every city under our control has a Keystone.  It gives authority to the wielder and also protects the city.  Only one of Alaire blood can use it—as that is how our artificers make them.  After my failure to control Pasturian, I was forced to hand the Keystone to Bastian.”

Dakkon’s curiosity won out, and he asked, “Who creates the Keystone artifacts?”

Constance seemed like she did not care about family secrets after being cast away to Earth.  “The seat of our power is on this planet on the twenty-first level.  Our family’s master artificers live there.  Some of the oldest and most revered members of our family. They forge the Keystones.”

It gave me some understanding of the Alaires.  “How strong are they?  The artificers.” This question got her uncomfortable as it was the heart of her family secrets, so I tried a softer question, “How strong is Bastion’s core?”

“Barely lower tier two,” she rasped out in anger.  “He flaunts it over us like he is special.”

“So most of the Alaire’s are upper tier one in strength?”  I asked.

“Fuck it.”   She said, giving in.  “Yes, our family is cursed.   There are only a dozen, maybe fourteen, with tier-two cores.  All our power is from the Keystones and being the only ones able to control them.  We employ hundreds of elves stronger than ourselves, but if others want protection in our cities, they need to serve.”

“So the strength of your core in your family indicates your position?”  I inquired.

“No. Well, the Council of Artificers are all tier two, but generally, to govern one of the Alaire cities, you need to be competent,” Constance grudgingly admitted.  The fact she lost her city meant she fell below the competence threshold.

“Would you eliminate your brother Bastian if the opportunity arose?” I asked Constance.  Fire lit in her eyes.

“Are you offering assistance?” She tentatively asked.

“Not directly.  Would you kill him yourself if you could?”  I watched her as she mulled the question.

It did not take long before she decided, “Yes, I would.  All his manipulations behind the scenes to bring me down and take my city.  I would have him killed.”  She looked at me, “What would I have to pay you to make that happen?”  Dakkon’s eyes went up, and he studied me as well, eager to listen to these interesting negotiations.

“Not me, you.” I paused, considering my options. And committed, “I could make you stronger to accomplish it yourself.”  Kiri’s hand appeared on my shoulder immediately and squeezed as hard as she could in what I assumed was a warning.  I had run the numbers in my head, though.  Raising Constance’s core would make her stronger than Bastian and allow her to challenge him.  Either way, one or both would be eliminated.

I turned to Dakkon, “Thank you for helping.  You can release her men and the woman.  I think we are going to come to an agreement in private.  Dakkon reluctantly stood, and we shook hands before he left.  He wanted to stay. I had not told Constance I would enlarge her aether core. Just that I would make her stronger. He needed to leave before I revealed anything else.

I was no master negotiator, and Kiri did not want me to extend the offer to Candance.  I still saw this path as a win-win for me.  Constance would become an ally, and she might remove Bastian from power so Eilina would be protected.

After Dakkon left with his three guards, I asked Candace, “If you also had a lower tier-two core, could you challenge your brother?”

“Probably not.  I only have two dozen loyal elves under me. Bastian has more than a thousand.  He controls two cities in the transits as well.”

I had not planned on that response. “Huh,” was my reply.

She returned to my question, “Wait, did you imply you have a method to increase my core’s strength?  Are you going to demonize me?  I think I will pass on becoming a demon minion.”

Candace stood to leave.  “If you walk out that door, you will miss out on the best opportunity to challenge your brother in personal power.  I can make you stronger than him, and it does not require you to become a demon.   And as a bonus, your female elf mage as well.”

I was not quite sure why I was offering this.  It was partly because I would gain life essence and partly because I would increase the power of Bastian’s enemies.  Infighting in the Alaries was a good outcome for Eilina. Candace was actually fairly attractive in her human guise and her true elf body, which I could see with my abyssal sight.  The mage I had captured was also attractive, but I just wanted more life essence from her.

Candace asked, “Can you improve my two other mages?  Jason and Pytor?”

“No.  My method only works on one gender,” I informed her.  Kiri’s hand was digging into my shoulder again, “One moment.”  I stood and went to talk with Kiri privately.

Kiri berated me, “You can not make the Alaire’s stronger!” The veins in her neck were standing out.

“I am not Kiri.  I am creating friction in the family.  Constance will leave Earth and confront her brother.  Eilina will be safe with no Alaires on Earth.  When I raise her core I will have the opportunity to block her memory of Eilina as well.  Eilina will be much safer in the end.”  Kiri considered my words, and they did make sense in a way.  I was thinking like a demon, causing chaos for my own gain—but also to protect my assets.

I left Kiri in the small side room to continue sorting out our agreement’s details.  As I sat, Constance asked, “Is there a risk for the process?”

“No.  If you want, I can work on your mage first.  After you see the results, I am sure you will accept my offer,”  I smiled reassuringly at her.

“When would this happen?”  she asked.  Her tone of voice indicated she was ready to commit to it.  “What do you want in return?”

“It would have to happen now.” I opened my arms, “I am very busy.  In exchange for this, I want you to return to the city of Pasturian and take it back from your brother.”

“That is it?  Just do something I wanted to do anyway?”  She nodded slowly, “It is not like I have anything to lose.  And Vestra can go first?  Has she been released?”

I took my phone and texted Dakkon about her thirteen agents. It was a few minutes before he replied they had been released and were in an IHOP getting breakfast. I smiled, “They apparently are getting pancakes, Constance. There is a hotel nearby their location. We can go there, and you and Vestra can join me in one of the rooms. This should only take an hour or two,” I smiled at her, and she was smart enough to know what I intended.

To her credit, she did not shy away from the insinuation. “I will meet you there after I pick up Vestra.” Constance left, and I looked at Kiri, who was still furious with me. It was not going to be a fun ride to the hotel.