Chapter 150

Everyone was tired, and I think the Ethereal Plane took something additional out of you.  Even I was feeling heavy eyelids.  I would spend five or six minutes in my mind space to get five hours of sleep.  I just wanted to walk the perimeter and make sure everything was secure.

I quietly exited the cabin and found a chicken coop out back.  The chickens looked normal, except their eggs were dark blue.  Maybe it was from their diet.  I walked around the orc Shepherd’s house twice.  The location, nestled high in the snowy mountains, was picturesque but still alien to me. The grass was pale green with black veins, the dirt red, and the sky green. I went inside and resumed my chair.  Aurora was still awake, and I told her to keep an eye out for a few minutes, and I entered my mind space.

I found Nashima and Aria in the central room.  I guess this could no longer be called the pedestal room.  Nashima was teaching the doppelganger how to transform into a non-humanoid.  “I have been waiting for you for a while,” Nashima said as I appeared.  “You made your trail through the Ethereal plane safely, but I wanted to warn you against returning and trusting the djinn again.”

“I know.  He obviously has designs on Vida,” I told the couatl.

She nodded, “I watched Haibaikel with what access you gave us to the outside world.  His helpful demeanor toward his child is an act.  I know djinn never lie, but they are as deceitful as demons when it comes to their dealings.  I suspect the request for gold as payment might have had an ulterior motive.  You should question the women with you separately to see what they remember when you flew off with the fire genasi to transfer your currency.”

I sighed, as I did not need another problem, “I can not do this right now.  Too much is happening.  I can not be suspicious of them, but I will try and question them when I get them alone,”  I said, feeling a growing headache.

“That is all I ask.  My genetic memory from eons of interactions with djinn tells me something is not right.  A djinn has never cared for its offspring like Haibaikel claims he does.  Maybe it has nothing to do with you.  But I suggest you take at least the one step of questioning them.  Get the scroll from Vida and store it in your mind space.  And then I would prevent all of us in here from touching it.”  Nashima seemed extremely serious.

“Okay, Nashima.  Warning received, and I will take those steps.  I am going to get my sleep and return.  The cabin should be safe for a few minutes,” I went to the bedroom and lay down, setting a five-hour timer.  Just five minutes would pass in the outside world.  When. I woke and found, unsurprisingly, Pandora snuggled up behind me. She was spooning me.

“Just five more minutes,” she murmured sleepily. She was joking and preventing me from leaving the bed.

“You don’t even need to sleep, Pandora.”  I accused her while removing her arms from around me.  She was instantly awake, the ambiance ruined.

“You need to loosen up, Caleb.  Lilith and I wanted to talk with you about the archangel.  I was just waiting for you to finish your sleepy time.  Beds are good for more than just sleeping, you know.”  She grinned while slowly rubbing her chest.

“Fine, I have some time to talk with you both.” I followed Pandora into the library.  Lilith had dozens of books laid out and was looking flustered.  They had made a huge error in thinking I was strong enough to confront Kushiel.  It had not gone well, and I was lucky that he had let me go after I gave him the location of Andromeda.  He had at least kept his word and let me go, thinking I was no threat to him or his kin.

Lilith looked up, “I think I figured out how strong Kushiel is and a path to development you can take to be able to match him as quickly as possible.”  She pushed a bunch of pages at me with how I should spend my life essence in order to gain power as quickly as possible.

Pandora added, “Here is my suggestion.”  She gave me a single note card.  I looked at it, and it read, fuck, collect life essence, repeat.

Lilith rolled her eyes.  “We have determined your vortex can handle about 300 life essence a day.  Beyond that, your vortex is going to fatigue like an overspent prostate.  Andromeda’s siphon helped a little, but we suggest two partners daily as your limit and thirty…”

“Forty,” Pandora interrupted.

“Fine, forty minutes of active vortex with each partner,” Lilith finished. “I am also making progress on projecting us into the material realm. I have a list of ingredients you will need to assimilate into your mind space for the ritual circle.”

“You are ready to do it?” I asked hopefully.

Lilith hedged, “Well, no. I think I can construct the circle, but I am still working on how to create the anchor. I think the pedestal that connected you to Andromeda may work. So if you actually do rescue her, see if she will give you some help.”

“I am sure she will be willing to do us a favor or two if we manage it. I do not even know for sure she is captured. I am going in on blind faith here from Carrie.” I spent an hour looking at Lilith’s notes while Pandora read a trashy romance novel. I did not even remember adding it to my mind space, but I had added a variety of books in the library at school before getting the vampyre lord’s library delivered.

I said my farewells and returned to the cabin. Only a few minutes had passed for me. I started my guard duty as the others slept, listening for any sounds outside.

Aurora woke first a few hours later, and it was dark out. Vida was next and said, “The nights are about ten hours, the days around fifteen. That is the best conversion estimate I can do.”

Vida started digging through her pack to prepare food for everyone. She had freeze-dried meals and just needed to add boiling water. We had a camping stove and plenty of water in our packs. I could get by without drinking as I was a demon, but everyone else needed water. As we ate, we discussed our options.

“We should get to the transit portal and enter. Now that we are here, I think Andromeda would be on a higher layer if she was captured,” I said.

Vida thought differently, “The white orc shamans work for the angelics. We should get to a city, capture one, and make them answer our questions.”

Iris gave her thought, “It would have to be a pretty important shaman to have knowledge of the higher layers and possibly Andromeda. It just does not seem like it would be common knowledge.”

Aurora was chewing on bubble gum, “Can’t you feel Andromeda, Caleb?” She popped a bubble, “I know the connection is severed, but even after my connection with Arturio Delgado was severed, I could still feel him. Only after he was dead was his presence no longer there.”

Everyone looked at me, and I shrugged and closed my eyes. Bedelia said, “You must feel the Force around you. Here, between you, me, the tree, the rock—everywhere.”

“Thanks, Master Yoda,” I chuckled at Bedelia. She was the only one in the current group that watched a lot of movies.

I blocked out everyone in the room and focused on remembering what it was like to have the connection to Andromeda and how it felt when she arrived in my mind space. It felt like I was searching in the dark, the source—a sound—a heartbeat. I started to sense a direction, not quite a direction, a higher elevation—no, a higher layer above us. My eyes shot open, “It worked!”

Iris commented first, “It has been three hours, Caleb! Bedelia told us not to disturb you, but it worked?”

“Yeah, it is kind of like a compass. It pointed to a higher layer. It’s a little vague, but we definitely need to find a transit entrance.” I relaxed in my seat and found myself sweating.

Vida stood, “Then we still need to go to a city. Maybe we will cross a portal entrance on the way otherwise, the city is most likely centered on a transit.”

Iris was confused, “Are all cities centered on a transit on Mercanious?”

“Of course. There are lots of trade opportunities, and there is somewhere to dump the undesirables. The other way to eliminate the undesirables is through the aether gate, like how I was sent to your planet,” Vida said like it was common knowledge.

“As soon as it is light out, then. We will follow the road,” I committed to our next action. I wonder if Bedelia was here to guide me. I might not have figured out how to locate Andromeda without her movie reference clue, even if it was meant to be a joke.

As the first rays of the alien red sun broke, we left the cabin. The orc and his brother were nowhere to be seen. I did not think the two had any way to cause us trouble. We followed the dirt road down from the mountains. Vida led the way as she would need to talk for our group. We all had translation devices. So we could understand anyone, but if that person did not have one, then they would not understand us in return.

Vida said only three major languages were spoken on the planet, and each orc spoke one or two. There was an ability that I could learn called multi-lingual. It allowed me to connect with a target’s mind and speak their language like I knew it. It just cost 500 life essence to learn, and my cap was only 340 currently. So it would be somewhere down the line.

As we left the upper elevations, we started to see some farms well off the road. All the fields were fallow, and I guessed it was now the winter season. We did not see any orcs outside their homes either. The road also started to look in much better shape as we moved. The clay was packed, and there were almost no stones. I first noticed the plume of smoke in the distance and pointed it out. It was large and indicated a large fire.

Vida studied it, not concerned, “Either a large town or a factory. Maybe a smelting town? We are in the mountains, and mining is prevalent in the mountains.” We continued down the road for four miles, and Vida was right; it was a mining town, and they were smelting ore in a massive furnace that dominated one side of town.

No one stopped us as we entered; all the orcs were gray and olive-skinned. We had a lot of resentful eyes on us, well focused on me and my white skin. I had chosen to be an elite orc of the ruling class. According to Vida, the ice orcs did not treat the other orcs well. A large town hall dominated the central square at the town center. A nervous white orc stumbled out of the building to greet us. For the ruling class of orcs, this male looked like a terrible warrior from his musculature.

“Esteemed Warrior! Welcome to the village of Iron Splinter! I can settle you and your consorts in my house if you come with me. Then you can tell me what business you have,” he seemed extremely nervous. At least he had the standard translation earring on in my abyssal sight.

“Lead, we will follow,” I said gruffly and with a note of impatience.

He rushed back into the central building, and we entered to find a well-furnished common room. A gray-skinned orc woman was fiercely trying to prepare a meal in a side kitchen. She was sweating as she rushed to get food ready for us. I scanned the room—a shelf with two dozen books, a large sitting area for ten or so people, and a massive desk with a lot of paper strewn about.

I ignored our host, went to the books, and started to scan each into my mind space. I would let Lilith and Nashima translate them. I pretended each one was interesting as I quickly paged through them. My companions waited like this was the most natural thing in the world. The ice orc mayor started sweating profusely, and I think one of the books was some type of accounting book for the Iron Splinter.

It made sense that he was corrupt and skimming or shorting the workers. As I was working on the last book, the cook rushed out with a large pot of stew. The Mayor of Iron Splinter looked relieved, “I offer your food from my stores! Priscilla is an adequate cook warrior. May I ask you your title?”

I made an indifferent gesture to Vida to answer for me, “This is Champion Appolyon. He recently defeated his seven brothers and took all of us as his concubines. He now is looking for a place to settle before having us bear his children.”

“Champion? No beads?” He immediately shut his mouth and looked fearful. I was an imposing figure, even among orcs. He was questioning my lack of beads, which symbolized a warrior’s accomplishments.

Vida answered for me, “His clan is Fallen. They do not have permission to wear the beads. Champion Applolyon will restore their rank. We are certain of it.” The orc man nodded like that was normal. A Fallen clan had just displeased one of the ruling classes and been stripped of rank and privilege. It was very common in ice orc society, according to Vida. Once I received a bead from someone of importance, I could start adding to my collection and have wonderfully braided hair.

Please sit and enjoy the meal. My house is yours. He took the orc woman who prepared the meal and dragged her out of the house, leaving us to have his house. Iris watched them go, saying, “He did not even tell us his name.”

Vida grumbled, “He is no one of importance. He probably thought we were here to kill him for incompetence or something else. He was put in charge of this mining community because of the color of his skin, not for his capability.” Vida tasted the stew, “It is not bad.”

Aurora looked startled, “Are you not afraid it might be poisoned?”

“Poisoned? I doubt it.” She did not explain and just started eating, “You will need to show your displeasure when you see him tomorrow. And you should definitely be very loud with us tonight. Make sure the miners can hear us.”

Iris asked, “Is your whole society based on male dominance?”

“Pretty much, the warrior caste anyway. The shamans fall into another caste, and then there are the artisans. But the warriors sit above all. Well, the ice orcs, anyway. We just need to be careful that Caleb does not offend any other ice orc warriors in the city. He looks imposing enough that no one should bother him. Growing up, anyone of his size was treated like a god.” She considered me, “But he also looks young and inexperienced.”

“If we must make loud copulation tonight. I will sacrifice myself for the deed.” Aurora had spoken, and everyone was a little shocked. “It is for my benefit as well. Caleb still owes my two enhancements.”

Bedelia objected, “We need to keep up with my slow core raising. I should be the target of his lust,” she was looking at my orc body, considering.

Iris was quiet, and I knew she would find some way to watch no matter who it was. Vida—Vida was plotting. “Vida, do you still have that scroll from Haibaikel? May I see it?”

She looked at her pack, “Yes, it is in my pack.” But she made no move to retrieve it. I walked over and dug it out.

“I am going to place it into my mind space so we don’t lose it.” Vida looked like she wanted to object, which confirmed that the efeert had spelled her or the scroll somehow. I assimilated the scroll, and it vanished. A disappointed Vida looked on.

I turned to Aurora, “So which enhancement would you prefer? You already have strength and quickness.”

“Constitution,” she did not hesitate to choose. “It will help me resist disease and improve my healing.”

I hated that Iris was looking on envious. Her aether core was so small she had only been able to get one enhancement, and I had given her endurance without exploring other options. “And your fourth?”

“Something with fine muscle control. I want to be able to aim effectively with aether pistols and rifles,” Aurora said. I nodded, went into my mind space, and quickly sorted to the elixir that would help her.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Elixer of Dexterity | Lower | Tier 1 | 100 life essence | fine motor control of hands |

“Aurora, Bedelia will be going first. After her, we can give you the constitution enhancement. I will create a dexterity enhancement for you when I have enough life essence,” I informed my group. Bedelia was already searching for the bedroom, apparently anxious to start. Aurora slowly nodded, not at all disappointed that she was only getting one enhancement tonight. I wondered if she actually enjoyed sexual relations with me. It was hard to tell. My saliva did seem to be the only thing that aroused her to orgasm.

“Found it!” Bedelia yelled from behind a door. “We just need to find some clean blankets. It smells bad. I do not want to touch it with my bare flesh.” I followed Bedelia into the room and got it prepared for the evening.