Chapter 74

I arrived at the massive shopping sprawl and didn’t know what to get my collection of mages. I had a long list. Iris, Vida, Kiri, Eilina, Mary, Bedelia, Abigail, and I also guessed Carrie and Rose. I went into the Apple store and walked around. A young man approached and started to ask if I needed help or an explanation. I had been thinking about getting everyone an Apple watch but decided that since they would get damaged in the transit, that wasn’t a great idea.

Maybe the Bazaar had insulated Apple watches? I hadn’t seen them on my last trip, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask. The Specialist said they had just received a new shipment of ipad Pros. I thought for a second, and they all liked watching Netflix’s *Emily in Paris*. The 13-inch version was $1200 before tax. When I told the Specialist I would take twelve, he thought I was joking. I also got twelve covers, and the total was just under $17,000. I was happy my Christmas shopping was mostly done in one trip.

I put the collection into my car, returned to the shopping expanse, and bought some glass Tupperware. I would cut up the litmus paper and fill the container with them, and then add my spit and use tweezers to fill the small bags Iris gave me. Seemed simple enough. I was conserving my aether, so I would have to do this project once I entered the transit.

I was buying some sneakers for myself when Paige called and said she had arrived. I told her where I was and went to pay for the three pairs I had selected. Paige arrived with her high school friend, Lilian. They had rowed together, and she had been one of the girls I watched work out with Paige in our basement.

“Hey Caleb, hope you don’t mind, but I got back from college this morning and called Paige, and she said I could hang out with you two,” she paused, “you have changed! You are huge! Have you been working out?” Paige was watching the interaction with interest. Was my sister testing me?

I offered, “You have no idea. I made some significant life changes this fall, and they are bearing fruit Lilian. Are you rowing in college like Paige?”

“I tried but decided to focus on school instead,” she said.

Paige interrupted, “And partying.”

Lilian turned red, “Yes, I put my social life ahead of working out for three hours a day.”

“So Paige, any idea on what to get mom and dad?” I said to get Lilian’s embarrassment behind us.

“I have $200 to spend, so I know this quilt mom wanted for their bed. It is $250, so you just need to contribute $50,” Paige said as she started walking.

“I can pay half. I have been helping Aunt Amelia with houses and have some spare cash,” I said without hesitation.

Paige raised her eyebrows but didn’t object. Thirty minutes later and I was saddled with the king-sized comforter. We stopped for a veggie and fruit juice at the *Fresh Squeeze* before continuing to shop. We passed by a lingerie store, and Lilian paused, “I should get something for Kyle.”

I joked, “I didn’t know your boyfriend wore lingerie.”

She didn’t hesitate to retort, “It is just to wrap the real gift, Caleb,” a smile on her face.

I decided to tease her, “Well, if you want a man’s opinion, you can model them for me. I don’t mind.” I put on my best lecherous grin for Paige and Lilian.

Lilian seemed to be considering my offer, and Paige’s eyes narrowed on me. “Yeah, Lilian, let us model some underwear for my brother.”

The lingerie store had a private dressing room with a viewing room just outside the changing room. They only allowed bras to be tried on; you had to purchase the panties as is. That was good enough for Lilian and Paige, who proceeded to model bra after bra in front of me. Paige was studying me intently every time they came out of the dressing room. I offered my honest opinions and made a show that I was not getting an erection from the display. I sat comfortably in a chair, leaning back with my legs splayed.

My favorite for Paige was a pink bra surrounded by black lace. Lilian looked best in a seafoam green lace that allowed her nipples to be seen through the fabric. It was actually fun, and Paige and her friend strutted each time they came out. Paige had a lean square torso with ab muscles hidden just underneath. Lilian was not as fit as Paige but not pudgy at all. I think Lilian was warming up to me as well as she got more and more animated with each bra.

I asked, “So when will Kyle get to unwrap his Christmas gift?”

She replied, “New Year’s. He is out in California for Christmas with his grandparents. They should be back on the 28th.” I nodded, and the conversation between Paige and Lilian heated up. They were planning to hang out till Paige had to fly to Florida to start her training with her team. That was December 31st. I was headed to Europe on the 26th with my parents.

I asked, “Lilian, we are going to Vincent’s tonight to celebrate Paige’s perfect GPA. Do you want to come?” Paige looked at me curiously, and I smiled with a grin.

“Yeah, sure. I will text my parents now. I have my mom’s car, though. I need to drop it off.” She said, considering.

“I can follow you home and drive you to our house when we are done here,” I offered before Paige could. When Lilian looked at Paige, she shrugged and agreed.

My inner incubus was hungering, and I needed to gather some aether to enter the portal. Lilian had given me a number of looks in the last two hours that were suggestive in my mind. We shopped till a little after four, and then the plaza started to get crowded, so I followed Lilian home in my car. She parked and said, “I am going to change. If you want to get something to drink, the kitchen is to the left.” I got out of my car and followed her inside, activating my lust aura as I did.

I wouldn’t use my voice or charming eyes but decided my lust aura was fair game. I got some water in the kitchen and waited for Lilian. My lust aura only worked when someone was looking at me, so when Lilian walked into the kitchen, I offered my best smile.

Lilian stutter-stepped on seeing me. She had changed her jeans for a long dress. She had the same shirt she had worn shopping. I asked, “Are you wearing your new bra and panties?” She had gotten the matching panties.

“Maybe,” she said with a secretive smile.

“I never got to see the panties on you in the store,” I said suggestively. I was thinking about bending her over the counter.

I was shocked when she said, “They are for Kyle’s eyes only, Caleb.” Even though she hadn’t succumbed to the lust aura, she had a lascivious smile as she moved to the foyer. Her hips swayed, and I didn’t understand where I had failed. I drove us to Vincent’s with my aura active. It was affecting her, and when we pulled into the parking lot, my enhanced senses could smell her arousal, but she hadn’t offered anything other than bland conversation. I turned off the aura as we went inside.

We were early and had to wait almost an hour for my parents to arrive with Paige. I asked Lilian dozens of questions. She was going to school in Boston. She had planned to row but, after two months, couldn’t balance it and quit the team. She really enjoyed the nightlife in Boston. She met her boyfriend, Kyle, at a Harvard party. He was a sophomore and extremely attractive, according to her. When I asked Lilian if she found me attractive, she just smiled.

My parents arrived with Paige, and we ordered. I ordered a personal spicy ham and banana pepper pizza. When our food arrived, Paige asked why I didn’t get the Hawaiian pizza, and I told her I didn’t want her stealing any slices. Paige didn’t like banana peppers, but she ate one to spite me anyway.

The topic focused on Lilian’s and Paige’s college experiences as my mother and father compared their college experiences. I was opposite Lilian in the booth. I tried to play a game of footsies with her, but she wouldn’t bite, probably because she was sitting next to Paige and was afraid of discovery. When dinner finished, I offered to drive Lilian home, but Paige said they were staying. Another of their friends from high school was back from college, and she was picking them up at Vincent’s.

I almost offered to join them but changed my mind. I think Paige was intentionally teasing me with her friends. I wasn’t sure why. Was she trying to figure out why her friends were so enthralled with me? More likely, she was trying to figure out how her brother had changed so much since the Halloween party.

My parents left after the meal, and I told them I was going to Iris’ house. I started to drive but got a text from Jade with an alert drawing me to read it immediately. Jade had just let me know the Anya situation had been handled. Anya would be moving to live with Jade right after the new year. I pulled over and called Jade, “Jade, thanks for handling that. How is Anya handling it?”

Jade sounded older, more mature, “Caleb, I don’t have time to hold her hand, Caleb. She should be excited to serve me. I have a lot of fires to put Caleb. Unless you want to help, I have to go.” Jade sounded like she was busy, but I didn’t have anything to do. Maybe understanding the demi politics would help me down the line.

“What do you need help with? I have the evening free,” I said after a short pause.

Jade was silent for almost a minute, “Caleb, thank you. I am sending you an address. Meet us there in an hour. Wear a suit.” Jade hung up. I had my Armani suit in the back. I had planned to wear it for my modeling session this morning with Carrie, as she wanted me dressed up.

I pulled down a back road and changed into my Armani suit.  I hadn’t had it dry-cleaned yet from my trip to New York.  I combed my hair and got groomed myself as best as possible in the car. I then went to meet up with Jade.  Jade was sitting in her SUV in a Red Robin parking lot.  Monsoon was driving with Frost in the passenger seat.  Artica and Jade were in the back.  I parked and got into the back.  Jade was dressed in a business suit.  I sat next to her while Antica moved her seat further back.

“Thank you, Caleb.  I have a regional meeting with the other demi councils,” she tapped Monsoon on the shoulder, and he started driving. “Nice suit.”

“Thanks, it is an Armani,” I bragged.  I had aged myself a bit, so the suit wasn’t too loose.  “What do you need me to do?”

Jade leaned back, “The meeting will have the vamp coven leader for Virginia, the east coast lieutenant for the wolfkin and a member of the Magus Arcanum.  I can bring two people inside with me.  It will be you and Monsoon.  You will stand behind me and just look competent.  You can advise me but don’t talk to the attendees personally.”

“What is the point of the meeting?” I asked curiously.

Jade scoffed, “They are educating me on the legal proceedings for criminal activity committed against others.  The vamps will try to bully me, and wolf beastkin will try to get me to defer to them.  The Magus Arcanum will watch and not do anything but moderate.”

“How do their populations compare to the catkin?”  I asked, trying to figure out who had leverage.

Jade looked at me and smiled, “We make up the three largest populations of demi in the area.  The wolfkin has double our population, and the vamps are about half in my territory.  The vamps have a number of lower tier 2 powerhouses, though.  They have the real power.” She heaved a sigh.  “I would have never challenged the alpha if I knew how much work it was going to be,” she shifted in her seat.

I thought for a while and asked, “Do any of them delve the transits?”

“No, not these local groups.  Maybe the vamp that runs all of North America might have a dungeon team or two.  The Magus Arcanum has maybe a dozen teams in North America,” Jade said after considering my question.

“Use that,” I said.  “Drop that you are a member of an independent delve team.  From what I know, it gives a lot of prestige.”

Jade laughed, “If the vamps thought I had a device to open portals, they would erase me, Caleb, in order to get it.” Frost in the front seat audibly snickered as well.

“Just tell them you are a member of the black team, Planned Pandemonium,” I said.  I wasn’t sure why I was helping Jade, but I needed allies, and staying on friendly terms with her would keep me informed as well.

Jade considered and nodded, “If an opportunity arises for me to name-drop, I will.”

The car ride was forty minutes toward Richmond.   It was in an old plantation manor.  The dining room was cleared except for a table with four chairs.  The vampire was clear as he was wearing sunglasses, and the man standing behind him also had shades on.  The wolfkin was a large man with a mullet and a permanent grin on his face.  Using my abyssal sight, the vampire was pasty pale and had stringy hair.  The wolfkin had dark silver fur and looked well-muscled.  Jade took a seat, and Monsoon and I stood behind her.

The Magus Arcanum representative walked in after Jade joined the table.  He was in his late 50s, dressed in a suit, and spoke, “Welcome.  I am here to mediate the reiteration of the local laws and policies for the established families of vamps, wolfkin, and catkin.  We are going over articles 1a to 19c today, discussing alterations to articles 3b and 7e….”

The next four hours were quite interesting for me while I stood there and listened.  The Magus Arcanum was the police and detective force with crimes going before a magistrate of the offended demi.  I didn’t understand a lot of how things were decided, but the vamps tried to get some things tweaked in their favor, which caused arguments.  Tension soon developed, and some shouting occurred.  I checked the aether cores of everyone.  The Magus Arcanum was upper tier 1, as were the wolfkin representative and his two subordinates.  The vamp was lower tier 2, and his bodyguard was lower tier 2 but barely.

I wasn’t given a second look during the entire meeting.  Monsoon did lean forward a few times and whispered into Jade’s ear to advise her, but I had too little understanding to offer advice.  When the meeting finished, I don’t think much was accomplished.  It seemed like it was just a review of laws, policies, and procedures.  As the meeting was breaking up, the vamps and Magus Arcanum left quickly.  The wolfkin lieutenant stopped Jade, and they talked for a good twenty minutes before we left.

In the car, Jade exhaled hard.  “Well, that was painful.”

I said, “Seemed kind of boring.”

“Well, there are so many loopholes in those laws.  When someone bends the rules that usually causes a small conflict.  The lieutenant wanted my word that we would band together if the vamps caused a problem.”  Jade looked at me, “The lieutenant does have a small response team for transits.  Usually, they just deal with the orc incursions.  But he indicated he might be willing to pay for access to a transit.”

I nodded, “I need to recharge my aether.  Just give me a few weeks of notice if you need a transit opened.  I will probably open it in disguise.” I didn’t want Caleb opening transits, just Apollyon Silverhorn.

I was dropped off at my car and was surprised to find it was 2:02 am.  It was a failure today as I didn’t harvest any aether.  At least my Christmas shopping was completed.  I started walking upstairs and found Lilian going to the bathroom. She must have crashed here tonight.

Thinking she must have gotten up because she heard me come home, I waited till she came out of the bathroom, and I smiled and whispered, “Hi, Lilian. Do you want to come upstairs?”

Lilian flushed and smiled, “No, it is late, and I am tired. Paige wouldn’t approve, either.” Frustrated, I wanted answers why I couldn’t seduce her. Maybe it was my hubris at being an incubus. I told myself I would use my charm on her to get answers but wouldn’t have sex with her. I activated my seductive gaze charm, and it slipped off. That was weird. I smiled as I examined Lilian’s core. It was lower tier-1, but it looked…. mutilated. And looking at her core, I could see why my charm hadn’t worked. There was something already in its place, ropes of aether controlling Lilian.

They were just as strong as my lower tier 2 charm threads, and I couldn’t break them. They seemed to naturally repel my effects as a defense. My efforts had caused Lilian to break out into a sweat. Even though my charm hadn’t taken hold, it had frozen her as I had battled to enforce my charm over the current one. I ended my efforts, “Lilian, are you ok?”

Breaking my efforts, she sagged and caught herself on the wall, “Yeah, just a little bit dizzy. I am going to go back to sleep.” She staggered for a second and went into the guest bedroom.

I went to my room and sat at my computer and pulled out my black team card for Planned Pandemonium. I used the code to access a secure connection to the Magus Arcanum site and started doing my research. What could cause such damage to an aether core and enslave someone? After an hour of researching and queries, I narrowed my search to something called an Aboleth.