Chapter 56

I drove to the address and was happy to find the driveway had two stone pillars and a swing iron gate at the entrance from the road.  Maybe there was some additional security?  It shouldn’t matter as all the pictures showed the house completely empty.  I parked and walked up the paved driveway to the house.  It was a steep driveway, and it would be a pain when it snowed.

The doorbell didn’t work, which told me the power was probably turned off, so there were no security cameras working.  I could see the issue with the septic.  On the right side of the house, behind the garage, was a small stream.  It looked that the stream had flooded and exposed the septic tank.  The two-car garage looked ok, and there even appeared to be an apartment above it.  That apartment wasn’t shown in the online photos.  There was a small deck up there, so I climbed the stairs and looked inside.  A small kitchen was visible.  A large living room with some doors that I assumed led to a bathroom and bedroom.

I tried the handles, and it was locked.  I wasn’t going to break in.  I checked the house, and no unlocked doors.  The backyard was set up with a small yard with a built-in grill, a fire pit and a large patio.  The yard was only about 150 feet by 100 feet.  The large trees surrounding the yard made it feel like you were in the middle of the woods.  I liked it.  I probably should have looked at it before placing an offer, though.  My cell phone even had 3 bars, so the signal wasn’t too bad.

I walked back to my car.  I drove home thinking what a great location this was.  My phone chimed a weird sound, and I checked it.  It was my other phone.  It was an alert from the Magus Arcanium.  There was a winter wolf spotted in western Virginia.  It was thought to have come through with the orcs.  The bounty was $10,000.  How hard could a wolf be to kill?

I wasn’t sure where my sense of adventure was coming from, but the drive was just 90 minutes west of here.  I called Kiri and asked her if she wanted to come, but she wasn’t leaving Eilina.  She said Bedelia was interested in going.  I sighed.  I told Kiri I would pick her up in 20 minutes.

I pulled into the driveway, and Bedelia came out of the house, practically skipping.  She jumped up in the passenger seat.  “Just you and me, Caleb.   I can navigate to the last sighting and then use my ability.”

I pulled out of the driveway and started west, “So, are you living there now?”

Bedelia said, “No, I was just hanging out.”  She paused.  “So, do you know about winter wolves?  The bounty was only for one, but they are challenging prey.”

I thought it was just a white wolf from the orc realm.  I was embarrassed but asked anyway, “So it is more than a big white wolf?”

Bedelia didn’t rub in my ignorance.  Instead, she patiently explained, “Large is an understatement.  They are the size of horses and can emit a blast of cold from their jaws in a cone.  Their jaws and rip metal.  They are most dangerous in packs.  A single wolf is not a threat to an experienced team.  But you don’t need a team because you have me!”

I was pulling into a gas station and turning around.  Bedelia said, “Stop!  It is just one wolf!  I have a stunning spell.  I will find it.  Knock it out, and you can bash it’s brains in.”  She lobbied to continue.

I parked in the gas station, “It is not worth risking our lives for a few thousand dollars.”

Bedelia seemed perplexed, “But that is what you do every time you enter a transit.  This is a controlled hunt, one monster, and we know all its attacks.  It doesn’t get easier than this.”

I thought her comments through and said, “I am still learning.  Now that I have more information, I’m changing my mind.”

Bedelia voiced her irritation, “Caleb, you keep saying we need to build trust.  So trust me.  We can find this wolf before anyone else and get the kill.  Not only do you get the cash, but you upgrade your black team.  Every time you do a task successfully for the Magus Arcanium, they increase your standing and offer you more profitable missions.  The frost wolf even has harvestable parts.  The pelt is worth over $5,000, and the frost gland can sell over $1,000 to an alchemist.  The beast should even have an aether crystal, probably upper tier 1!”

“I am not going to go around putting my life at risk for the Magus Arcanium,”  I said with some finality.

Bedelia was quiet as she stared at me.  She was trying to formulate her response.  Bedelia was the type of person who sought excitement, kind of like Jade.  “A winter wolf is at most an upper tier 1 beast Caleb.  We are both lower-tier 2 humans.  We can kill it.”

I thought that it really was a good idea to practice fighting monsters, “Are you 100% sure you can stun it?” I asked.

Bedelia cracked a smile, “Yep.  Let’s stop at a gas station to get some water.  I’m thirsty.”

I got a coffee, Bedelia got a Gatorade, and we drove west.  Bedelia spent a lot of the drive complaining that most of the classes in the high school were useless.  I shut her up by saying she could always go back to Paris.  The GPS beeped.  Bedelia went into her scrying state.  Her eyes went white, and I waited.  It was a good twenty minutes before she returned.

Bedelia looked confused, “The wolf killed two hunters about 5 miles west of here.  It looked like a fresh kill, but I didn’t find the wolf.”

I asked, “Should we leave?  If two hunters are dead...”

Bedelia showed indecision but finally said, “Yes, let’s leave, I couldn’t locate the wolf, and that is a concern.  It could be in a cave or raced out of range after the kill.  It is a smart animal, but it shouldn’t know we are tracking it.”

I put my car in reverse and swung it around, and started back down the forest road.  It was dark, and my headlights created a lot of shadows in the trees.  A large white beast flashed thirty yards in front of the car.  “Shit, that was bigger than a horse,” I said.

Bedelia gripped the door handle, and her eyes went white, “I am trying to track it.”  A few seconds later, she swore, “Caleb, it must be an alpha.  I can’t see it with my sight.”  We were two miles from a main paved road.  I saw movement far ahead of us.

As I drove, I figured out the wolf had knocked down a tree.  “Can you still stun it?”  I asked hopefully.

She looked uncertain as I slowed down, “Probably not. An alpha is a lesser tier 2 beast.  I am sorry, Caleb.  My only other useful spell is a shield, but it won’t have much effect.

 My thoughts cycled.  Defense trumps offense.  That meant my lower tier 2 charm was not going to work.  I would still try, but I was prepared for it to fail.  Before reaching the downed tree, I spun on the snowy road and started in the other direction, “See where this road actually goes.  I am assuming our new friend is going to race ahead and knock down another tree.  When we see the tree fall, we will jump out and let the car roll forward.  The headlights should blind him.”

Escape seemed the best option. That meant flying out of here.  Revealing my incubus form to Bedelia was a risk.  I could leave her and let the wolf kill her but that wasn’t me.  I hadn’t become callous yet.  My vision picked up the tree going down across the road in the distance.  “Jump out,” I yelled while letting the car glide at 5 mph forward.

Bedelia rolled out late and slammed into the hard snowy ground.  I ripped off my shirt and transformed.  My new black spandex suit fit well but my lower body stretched my army fatigues.  My wings shot from my back, and I looked for Bedelia and saw her struggling to stand.  I rushed to her and wrapped her in my arms while she was dazed and leaped into the air.

She panicked for a second, “It’s me, Bedelia.  Don’t do anything stupid.” I flapped my wings and strained to gain altitude.  Fuck, my flight ability worked by negating my body weight so my wings could maneuver me.  The added weight of Bedelia was not in the equation. I forced myself to get us up into a large tree, some 50 feet off the ground.  I secured us to a branch and transformed back.  Maybe it had been too dark for her to see my incubus form clearly.

Bedelia was quiet but held onto the trunk while I scanned the ground.  I saw the wolf approach cautiously, and Bedelia spoke, “So not human.  That kind of makes sense.  Dragonkin?”  Her question irked me.

“Is this really the time for twenty questions?  I can’t fly you out of here.  You are too heavy,” I whispered, irritated.  She had assured me this little adventure was safe.  The massive wolf sniffed my car, which had come to a stop and was now following the road toward us.

It was searching where I lifted off with Bedelia.  Now I just had to hope it couldn’t find us and some more hunters arrived.  I whispered to Bedelia, “Can you see any other hunters close?”  Bedelia nodded and went into her trance.

After two minutes, she said, “I don’t see anyone.”

My thoughts were perhaps I could tease the wolf and lead it away from the tree and Bedelia.  The wolf’s head was in my car, and I saw him pull something out.  My keen vision discerned it was the foam container from my turkey burner yesterday.  He was licking it to get the gravy in the bottom.  I should really clean my car better.  The wolf finished and started circling the car.  We were quiet as it came underneath our tree and stopped.  My heart pounded, and I could hear Bedelia’s heart, who was hugging me now.  The wolf looked up slowly...*shit.*

Bedelia whispered, “Wolves can’t climb trees.”  She was trying to sound reassuring.

The winter wolf got up on its haunches and stretched out, sniffing....its head was 15 feet off the ground.  It looked right at me and growled, vibrating the tree.  It settled back and took a claw swipe at the trunk.  Bark and wood flew.  The tree, maple, I think, was maybe three feet in diameter. The wolf wasn’t going to take long to cut it down.  “How is that stun coming along,” I asked.

“Sorry, Caleb.  It won’t take hold.  It keeps slipping off because of his strong will,” she said as it chipped another chunk out of the tree and looked at us mockingly. It inhaled deeply, and I switched to my incubus form and wrapped Bedelia in my wings. The rush of cold air caused a layer of ice to form around me. When he stopped, I broke the ice shell and checked on Bedelia. She seemed fine, just a little stunned.

I checked myself, and I felt cold, but I don’t think I was damaged. I looked at the wolf and noticed a frayed harness on its body. “Hey, Bedelia, are these wolves used as mounts by the orcs?”

Bedelia looked down, “Yeah, but the scrubs they sent through wouldn’t bring them. They are for the elite. I talked with Vida, who said all the orcs they sent to Earth were barely considered adults. But that is definitely a riding harness…or what is left of one.”

I tried staring into the beast’s eyes and using my charm ability but I think it realized what I was doing and broke eye contact before I felt the effect take hold. I was definitely leveling up this ability when I could. It would have worked if I had more time or would have worked faster if it had been stronger. “Ok, I’m going to fly down to my car and get my clubs and fly up to another tree. If I can lure Sparky away, I will do that. If not, I will come back and keep him distracted until help comes. Keep scanning for other hunters.”

Before she said anything I jumped and flew to my car, I had my clubs and was airborne as the big mutt reached me. Well, I mistakingly misjudged my white advisory. I was airborne and a good 30 feet off the ground and heading straight up. But he has a good leaping ability. My calf was seized in his jaw and my flesh was pierced by his fangs, and I was whipped to the ground.

The air was knocked out of my lungs as I hit and slid across the ground in front of my car’s headlights. I maintained my grip on both clubs, at least. The beast moved toward me, snarling. It was 10 feet away and sizing me up. On one knee, I used both my soothing voice and charming eyes in concert. The beast tried to look away, but I felt the link. It was fighting it, but I had enough to halt him, “Good puppy. Just relax. Daddy is not going to hurt you,” I cooed, my hand out, pulling a Chris Pratt.

The head of the wolf was as big as my torso, and the massive jaws were speckled with my blood. I felt like I was walking a tightrope. Any second, I could fall and be consumed. The monster was majestic in its size and appearance and if I was about to become its chew toy, I would have admired him. I had one free swing before my charm would be broken. I wasn’t going to be taming this king. Even now, I could feel his will wrestling with my charm.

I dropped one club and hobbled forward, still saying calming things that the white giant didn’t understand fully. With two hands on my tetsubo, I swung it like an axe. The overhead strike connected squarely between its eyes. It was dazed for a moment but not down, my quick second strike landed immediately after, and its legs gave out.

Seven more strikes, and finally, the skull caved in, and I relented. I leaned against the body, confirming its heart no longer beat. The aether core was strong in aether and just had wisps of life essence. I slapped my vortex over it anyway. I guess only sapient life had strong life essence. Curiously I pointed my cuff at the beast to get a reading, 1.09, a lesser tier 2 beast. I dug the aether crystal extractor out and took the crystal, placing it in my front pocket. Curiously when I did, my vortex collapsed. How long could I have used the vortex and still harvested the aether crystal? Were they mutually independent? Or had I damaged the aether crystal? No time to ponder.

I had been in the light of the car headlights the entire time. Bashing away in my incubus form. I looked for Bedelia, and she was staring down at me, jaw agape from the tree.

I decided to go into a monologue loud enough that she could hear me, “It is just one wolf, she said. It will be easy, she said. I can stun it, she said. We are building trust, she said.” The fur of the beast was definitely comfortable as I rested on it and checked my wound. I don’t know how those jaws didn’t snap my bones like twigs. My flesh was also just punctured and not torn, and the wounds were already closing.

I could see Bedelia climbing down the branches with difficulty, and I let her do it alone as I returned to my human form. I hobbled over for my black spandex top and fatigues and put them on. I heard Bedelia hit the ground, “I’m fine!” she muttered as she stood covered in snow. She walked a little gimpy over to me and asked tentatively, “How is your leg, Caleb?”

I figured the holes, “Should be healed in a few minutes. Hopefully Whitey didn’t have rabies.” I eyed her, and she fell beside me and leaned into the white wolf next to me.

“Sooo… considering my contribution to the kill, I think you should take the entire bounty,” Bedelia stated.

“Ya think?” I said sarcastically.

There was a long pause. Bedelia said, “I will report the kill. Do you want me to call in the clean-up team? They can harvest the parts for a 20% fee if you are not skilled…I have some training, but this is a big one.”

“Yeah, do that. Do we have to wait, or can we leave? What about the dead hunters?” I asked, standing and testing my leg. The muscles seemed ok, and I barely limped.

Bedelia stood, and I guessed she injured her knee in falling the last ten feet from the tree. Curious, I aimed my bracer and got her reading, 1.03. Barely into the tier 2 threshold. She spoke, following me to my car, “No, they will hold the pelt and other harvestable material at the nearest Bazaar till you pay the 20%. I sent the general location of the dead hunters. We should wait till the clean-up team comes in case another hunter group tries to poach our kill.”

It was three hours of silent sitting before to large SUVs came down the road. I stayed in the car while Bedelia talked to them. When she returned, I started the car and began the drive back. About halfway back, she finally spoke, breaking the silence, “So, a lesser demon or half-demon? The horns gave it away.”

I didn’t respond. I pulled into Iris’ driveway at 4:22 am. Bedelia didn’t get out. “What do I need to do to earn your trust Caleb? I know I fucked up big time tonight. I don’t care that you are a demon. I am fully committed. I want to explore the transits. It is the only thing I have ever dreamed of doing,” she finished and looked about to cry.

I paused, “You and Jade would get along well. You are not out…yet. I don’t blame you for what happened tonight. The Magus Arcanium blindly sent out a bounty with insufficient information. We lived and learned from the mistake. Next time,” I couldn’t believe I was saying there was going to be a next time, “We will be better prepared.”

Bedelia nodded, “Does everyone inside know you are….”

“No. Kiri, Eilina, and Vida don’t,” I said with seriousness.

“Ok. I won’t say anything. Maybe we can talk sometime about it. What it is like to have demon blood. I mean, demons were not covered much at the academy since they inhabit the higher layers. We were just told they are selfish beings that will use anyone to achieve their objectives, but I am not getting that vibe from you. You were willing to sacrifice yourself for a chance for me to get away.”

I reeled mentally a little. I was using everyone around me to get stronger. But I was willing to protect them even at the risk of harm to myself. “Yeah, maybe. I will see you at school. Tell Abigail I can’t run this morning after tonight’s adventures. I want to clean up and rest up.” Bedelia got out and shut the door, and I drove home.

I patted the crystal in my pocket. Another small fortune for almost dying. I will admit the adrenaline rush was intense, and the feeling after winning… Who was I becoming?