Chapter 45 *Pour Advice*

I pulled into the driveway and went inside of Iris’s’ house.  Iris, Kiri and Abigail were at the table in the kitchen and they all looked serious.

Iris looked at me and said seriously, “The Magus Arcanum sent out an alert.  Ice orcs have landed outside nearby.  They used the snowstorm as cover last night but were found out.”

I absorbed the info but was confused, “So what are ice orcs?  And do we need to do anything?”  I sat at the table with them.

Kiri spoke, “They are just orcs that prefer cold temperatures.  Usually around freezing.  They are typically white-skinned, but sometimes regular orcs will be incorporated into their clans, so don’t trust the skin color.  Their shamans like to pull planets into an ice age and then migrate their clans to it.”

“So that is good then?  Won’t it counteract global warming?”  I asked trying to be positive.

Iris rolled her eyes, “Combating global warming, maybe, but it is going to create superstorms and violent weather across the planet.”

“So what is the Magus Arcanum doing about it?  Don’t they protect the planet from threats like this?” I asked, somewhat confused.

“They issued bounties on the ice orcs.  The forest nearby is not the only portal site.  The Magus Arcanum has sent their kill teams to more important sites.  When those are cleaned up they will come here,” Iris answered.

“How many sites are there?  Is this a full-scale invasion? How did they get here?” I sounded concerned and went to the fridge for a sandwich.  Abigail came behind and said that was my lunch tomorrow and put it back.   I was just stress-eating.

“I don’t know the number of sites.  The post I saw showed five in the United States and six in Canada,” Iris said, turning in her chair to face me.  Not an invasion.  They teleported a few light dozen light years to get here.  Not sure of their origin, but long-range teleports only allow organic matter since it has to synchronize with the aether used in the teleport.  Each site will probably have one or two shamans and a half dozen warriors defending them.  They will scavenge weapons,” Iris relayed the information that she got from the Magus Arcanium alert.

“Can’t teleport with weapons.  It sounds like they stole the idea from the Terminator,” I said.  Iris and Kiri both looked confused.

After a pause, Abigail burst, “Oh! I get it!” I held up my hand, requesting a high five from Abigail and she rewarded me with a solid connection.  The next ten minutes were spent explaining the plot of the Terminator movie to Iris and Kiri.  Kiri at least had an excuse for not knowing but Iris apparently operated outside the cultural mainstream.

After the exhausting explanation to justify my quip, I sat down. “Why are they coming?  I mean it sounds like they will easily be repelled,” I asked trying to figure it out.

“Overpopulation,” Kiri supplied.  “When orcs take over a planet they quickly overpopulate.  The attempt is a win win situation for them.  Reduce the population by a few hundred and have a slim chance of disrupting another planet.”  There were a lot of things I didn’t understand still.

“So they send their scrubs?  We should be able to handle their scrubs.  Kiri do you want to go and check it out?” I asked since I was curious to see what an orc looked like in person.  I know Abigail was still finding her way in the new wider world she had been introduced to so she was not coming.  I added, “So how much are the bounties?”

“Even their scrubs,” Iris said harshly, “are trained warriors.”  She relented to my question and added “The bounties are one hundred thousand for a head for a shaman and ten thousand for a warrior.  But the danger is real.  These orcs grew up their entire life fighting.  The warriors will protect the shaman,” Iris explained.  I looked at Kiri, who was waiting on me.

“So Kiri, are you up for saving the planet from the fiendish snow orcs?” I asked, and she smiled.  She was a warrior.

Iris looked slightly worried, “There is a rally site for those that are planning to go bounty hunting.  If you are going out then you should go to the dive bar off of….” She checked her phone, “I will send a pin to your phone.  It is called *Pour Advice* and is off McCullen road off of 15.” My phone notified me of a message, and the pin was a 28-minute drive when I checked.

Kiri stood and went into the other room while talking, “I got you a present today, Caleb.  I got you a pair of tetsubo.  It is a type of club, and I think it will be much more effective than a hammer for you based on our first training session.  So do you want to go and try them out on some orcs?” Kiri said with a grin.  “I will go unpack my aether rifle.”  Kiri left the kitchen.

The tetsubo looked like a thick baseball bat with metal bands running along the length.  They were heavy, but I could still effectively wield one in each hand.

Iris added that she commissioned and paid for the sleek looking clubs.  She was seeking some praise so I gave it to her and a hug with a long kiss for the gift.  Kiri returned with her sleek looking rifle.   We went to my car and Iris came outside and tossed me the keys for her truck. “I am already registered with the Magus Arcanium.  I don’t know if they would run the plates of your car, but just to be safe, take my truck.”

“Thanks Iris.  Are you sure you don’t want to come?  It might be good experience for our next trip to the transit and with other bounty hunters nearby the danger should be minimal,” I said.

Iris paused then answered, “No.  It is cold outside and the snow is deep in the forest.  I will pass.”

Abigail looked confused, “So you are actually going?  What about our time together?”

I had forgotten about Abigail.  We were supposed to have an aether core expansion session.  “Abigail, I will make it up to you.  If we get back in time we can work on your aether core tonight.”  She didn’t look happy but didn’t say anything.  I left with Kiri in the truck.

On the drive, Kiri was quiet but eventually asked, “Caleb,” she hesitated, “I would like to train with you again.”  I couldn’t tell if that was innuendo for sex.

“Sure, Kiri, I need a lot of training,” I said, returning possible innuendo.  I switched to the upcoming adventure, “What do you know about orcs?”

I noticed she grinned, “orcs are humanoid.  Some are civilized and some are barbarians.  The thing is they breed fast and grow fast.  Six months to birth and then ten years to become full grown.  They love to fight.  Very few are able to manipulate aether.  I am a little shocked they are sending so many shaman to Earth for something likely to fail.  But then again orcs are not known for their intellect.”

“Iris mentioned something about orcs in the Adirondack forest up in New York a week ago. Maybe this is connected to that incident. If this is a threat to Earth, I want to check it out. But let’s not do anything dangerous,” I said. I wasn’t sure where my new lust for adventure was coming from. I guessed it was overconfidence from my enhanced physical nature of being an incubus.

We talked a little about human culture and I explained how movies were mostly fiction, including Harry Potter. I really had wanted to ride that joke out till she watched all eight movies. We followed the GPS on my phone and turned down a wooded road and came to a very old looking coverted barn. A half dozen cars were parked half hazardly about. A sign that had seen better days was over the door saying, *Pour Advice*.

“I guess this is the place,” I said, getting out of the truck and taking my two new clubs with me. Kiri shouldered her aether rifle and followed me inside.

I walked through the door and smelled cigar smoke in the semi-lit room. There were a lot of dark corners and two well-used pool tables. The tables were half occupied, and the bartender, an old man, was pouring some beer from his tap. This looked like a biker bar off the beaten path. I sat with Kiri at an open table, and a few people looked at us. More than a few admired Kiri’s sleek aether rifle.

I had never been into guns before, but maybe I should look into them with my new profession. Maybe an aether pistol with a hostler….like an old western gunslinger. I started to take inventory of the people around the room.

At the furthest table was a group of men in leather jackets, bikers. That was weird because I hadn’t seen any motorcycles outside. Their aether cores were all lower tier 1. Maybe they were not part of this bounty-hunting expedition. The bartender came and put two mugs at our table, ‘on the house,’ he said and returned to his position behind the bar.

In the shadows of a corner was the brightest aether core in the place, and I focused my gaze there next. I guessed maybe lower tier 2 but just barely. It had to be a woman based on her size. As if sensing my stare, she leaned into the light a little revealing her face. She had a very youthful face, I guessed 15 or 16, but I couldn't be sure with such a short examination. She looked human, and I didn’t sense any type of disguise. Her hard gaze studied me and then she looked perplexed before leaning back into the cover of the shadows.

The next table was a group of demis. Three wolfmen and a rabbit. The rabbit was a woman and she was trying to explain what a double entendre was to two of the wolfmen while the third was laughing at his companion's ignorance. Catching a brief wisp of the conversation, it had to do with the name of the bar, *Pour Advice*. One wolfman was convinced it meant ‘seeking your answers in a pint’. While the other was arguing the opposite, pour actually meant poor. So he argued that the advice you got from drinking was terrible. It was at least entertaining watching the group, who seemed to be good friends.

Another table held two human men. They looked like they had just watched Blade and had black dusters on and weapons poking out around their person. I looked down at my two baseball bats leaning against the chair and suddenly felt underprepared.

The rest of the patrons were men, and all appeared human and uninteresting in my abyssal site. I sipped the ale, and it was bitter and watery. I placed it down. I leaned into Kiri, “So what do you think?”

She whispered to me, “The girl in the corner is the strongest one in here after you. She is definitely a mage. The group at that table is probably some type of beastkin,” she indicated to the wolfman and rabbit demi. I forgot she didn’t have my aether sight ability. “They are competent. The only other decent warrior in the room is that guy on the far wall.” I turned my attention to him.

A man in his forties was near the bathroom doors with his back to the wall and in full sight of everyone in the room. He didn’t look exceptional, and I didn’t see any weapons. “How do you know?” I asked Kiri.

She leaned back in her chair and talked openly, “He is observant and alert to everything going on in here. He is also by the two back exits, the kitchen, and bathroom. He has a concealed knife across his chest and a pistol as his side by the wall. I think he has some magic, but that is a guess by my instincts.” I focused on his leg. In the darkness, under the table, it did look like a gun on his hip. I guess elves had excellent sight.

I felt like Luke Skywalker walking into the Mos Eisley Cantina. A young boy entering a ‘wretched hive of scum and villainy.’ In truth, these people were all just bounty hunters, and their efforts would be helping Earth but I still liked my Star Wars analogy.

A beautiful young woman entered the bar, but my aether sight quickly showed me she was a much older woman with silver hair and crowfeet. So someone is extremely vain to hide behind the illusion. Then I noticed the Magus Arcanium crest on her coat as she moved to the bar and faced everyone. She took a moment to take everyone in and then spoke, “Thank you for answering the call. We have identified two shamans and six warriors. We have the initial coordinates for their teleport, and you can start your search there. Frith will take your names,” she indicated to the old bartender. “I will remain here until all the offenders have been brought to me.” She sat at the bar.

I watched as one-by-one bounty hunters registered with the barkeep. I looked at Kiri, “Do we give them names or something?”

Kiri seemed to think, “No, we can use an alias. I think the device that Frith is using will like your aether signature to the name, though. Look some people are just placing their hands on the device and not giving a name. They are probably already recorded.”

I pulled out my phone and started a search, and Kiri asked, “What are you doing?”

“Trying to find a badass bounty hunter alias,” I said, focused on my phone. She just stood and walked to the bar to register while I searched for the perfect name.

Ten minutes later, Kiri was getting anxious as almost everyone had left in their vehicles. I looked at her, “So I am deciding between *Oringo*, which means one who loves hunting. Or *Nokoa*, which means warrior. What did you choose?”

“Kiri,” she said, which made me feel kind of stupid. I walked to the bar and put my hand on the device, and Firth looked at me, ready to note my name down.

“Apollyon,” I said. He noted it, and I turned to Kiri, and we walked out. I had been studying Latin and Apollyon was the Greek name for Satan, the archfiend. It was my instinctual response when I reached the bar, so I went with it.

As we walked toward the truck the young girl from the corner of the room was sitting on the tailgate. Her face was clearly visible. She had large sea-green eyes, light freckles and dark brown hair that seemed glossy in the light in the parking lot. Her feet swung under her as we approached.

She spoke first, “Nice truck. My name is Bedelia.” Her accent sounded….Irish or maybe Scottish. She had no weapons visible on her person. She continued, “You and the elf seem like the best pair to team up with. I will do a 50-50 split with you two.” She held up her hands to halt any type of protest. “I have a scrying spell that can locate the orcs. I find them. You kill them. 50-50 split. Agreed?”

I looked at Kiri, who was studying the young girl. I turned to her and asked, “How old are you?”

Her face went sour, “Seventeen. If you don’t want to work with me, the wolfmen will.” She hopped off the tailgate and started to walk away. I looked at Kiri again, who gave me a short nod of approval.

“Hope in Bedelai and let us know where to go,” I said, and she spun on her heel and moved to the passenger door before Kiri could get there. Kiri didn’t seem to mind and got in the back.

I started the truck and looked at Bedelia. Her eyes were now completely white. A few seconds later, she said, “There is a shaman about six miles northeast of us. I think I saw three warriors, but maybe four, or that could have been a prisoner. They are still setting up. When we get closer, I will do another scry.”

I pulled up my phone map, made a pin roughly six miles northeast, and followed the prompts.