Chapter 147

I was certain Kushiel had left and was not coming back.  He seemed to not care about mortals, so I assumed he was not going to care about the Archbishop and his team.  I sprinted down the road that Rose had walked up.  It would take me right to Rooster Rock, where they waited.

The gravel road crunched under my feet as I kept my abyssal vision active and looked for enemies.  Two men in the woods to my left started firing a semi-auto pistol.  Slugs tore into my black armored clothing and did not penetrate.  I cut into the woods and was on both of them in seconds, tearing the guns from their hands, breaking their wrists, and then continuing on.  The Archbishop was in the center of a clearing by a rock formation.

I pivoted and went right.  The soft sand in front of me contained a containment array.  I had fallen into one of these traps when I first confronted Iris at her house.  There were men everywhere, and that was not the only hidden containment circle.  They had prepared the are thoroughly.

I was slightly surprised when an aether pistol burned a hole in my chest.  The smell of my burning flesh had me seek cover behind a large tree.  The Archbishop yelled, “That is not a human!  It is the demon we hunt! Switch to incendiary rounds.  They can burn through the demon’s hide.”

White flashes of magnesium bullets, mixed with shots from the one aether gun, burned around me.  I dashed from cover behind a rock to prevent the men from flanking me too quickly.  I was too fast for them to train their shots on me.  Maybe I was overconfident, but I also had reinforcements coming.   Bedelia sent a text that Aurora, Kiri, and Artica would be here in minutes.

I checked the burn in my chest.  The black uniform had melted, and my skin looked like a quarter-sized cigarette burn. The healing was even now erasing the mark.  It hurt, but I would be fine as long as I was not struck in the eye.  I peeked, and the aether gun wielder was standing behind a containment circle in the dirt.  Well, two can play this game.  I was not going to get away with not killing anyone today.

I materialized my two heavy Guardian aether pistols to my hands and fired.  Both struck the surprised man, burning holes through his chest, and he collapsed.  An incendiary round…some type of magnesium round…hit me and burned my armored clothing as it flared. It was not as powerful as the aether bolts. I moved right and started to cycle my fire between targets, drawing on my aether reserves to power the guns.  Nine….eight…seven…six….five…four men left who finally started to run.  The bishop and inquisitor were among them.  They did not have weapons to fire at me, so I did not target them. They hoped to capture me in the containment circles, but I could easily see the traps.

They were running to their vehicles to make a getaway.  Aurora erupted from a trail to my left, Artica just behind her.  I could see Kiri a hundred yards back.  I yelled, “Tie up those who are still alive.  I am going after the rest.”  I sent my aether pistols to my mind space, transformed into my demon form, and took to the air.  I noticed Aurora ignoring me completely and running in the direction I was flying.  She wanted to confront her tormentors.

I was above the canopy and landed on the unaware man guarding the vehicles.  I picked him up and tossed him into the van, breaking a few bones and knocking him out.  I transformed back into my human form and leaned casually on the hood of an SUV.  Maybe not casually, as smoke drifted up from my burned clothing and flesh.

The Archbishop and three others came out of the trees.  The old man to his right, Grand Inquisitor Arturio, had the strongest core.  He was an upper-tier one, and I knew he had mind-control skills.  He had fear in his eyes, while the Archbishop had defiance in his.

The two soldiers of the Purists fired their incendiary rounds at me. They missed me as I quickly stepped.  Aetheric chains wrapped the two men and crushed their wrists, forcing them to drop their weapons.  Aurora had greatly increased the range and power of her skill.  I had a dozen burn holes in my combat clothes.  It was too bad that Kushiel had burned out my shield belt.  These clothes were now worried.

Archbishop Esposito kept in his bravado, “Even if you killed the archangel, you will need protection, demon.  They will avenge him by sending twenty times his number!”

I laughed as Aurora entered the clearing, holding the two Purists and her aetheric chains starting to bind the surprised Archbishop and Grand Inquisitor.  I spoke, “I did not defeat the archangel.  I lost quite badly, actually.  He let me go as I was not worth his time.”

The Archbishop looked incredulous and turned to Aurora, “Inquisitor Aurora, release me and bind the demon!  You know what they represent.  You must fight on the side of righteousness!”

Aurora was binding all four men and walked to stand next to me.  Her aetheric chains had bound all their mouths as she apparently did not want to listen to them.  They were completely helpless.  Aurora looked at me, and I nodded, indicating it was her decision on what she wanted to do.

Aurora addressed them with a cold tone, “The only side I am fighting on is my own.  I do not serve the church or this demon.  I only serve myself.”

Artica sprinted out of the trees, seeing everything under control, and addressed me, “Kiri is watching the Purists.  Three are still alive.  Bedelia is driving up with the others.”

Aurora was still focused on the Archbishop, coming to a decision. Her aetheric chains wrapped around his neck. The same happened to Arturio, a chain of aetheric energy closing on his throat.  Aurora spoke without emotion, “You took my youth and innocence from me, Archbishop Esposito.  You made me think you were my father and that I was serving the greater good.”  The aetheric chains began to rise, lifting him off the ground by his neck.  His wrists were already bound, so there was nothing he could do to stop being choked.  His mouth was stuffed with aetheric chains, and he struggled as his face turned red and his eyes bulged.

Aurora watched uncaringly and spoke again, “You took my mind and my life from me. Now I take yours.”  Even after the Archbishop stopped struggling, Aurora just held him there for long minutes.  I hoped the revenge was cathartic and worth it.  I was just realizing that I had killed people.  Not having guilt about it was only mildly disturbing to me.  Half an hour ago, I was certain I would die to the archangel Kushiel.

The body was released, collapsing to the ground like a puppet with no strings. She turned to Grand Inquisitor Arturio Delgado.  He looked afraid, “And you were his dog controlling my leash.  Forcing me to do what was needed in the name of the Inquisition.  You are no better than him.”  The chains around his neck lifted him off the ground as well.  The old man struggled harder than the Archbishop.  He lasted longer but eventually suffocated as well.  Aurora’s aetheric chains had become much stronger.  Her enhanced core and practice had made her formidable.

She held the dead body in the air for a few minutes and then dropped his corpse.  I waited on Aurora.  She was a frigid killer.  She slowly turned to me.  “Thank you.  I feel freer now and no longer feel any connection to Arturio.  I will still travel with you to Mercanious.  Do you need my help cleaning up?”

Artica spoke, exasperated, “We have a number of bodies to dispose of.  So, yes, we need your help.”  Aurora just nodded and started helping drag the bodies together.

I called Bedelia, “Take Mary, Rose, and the others back to the cabin.  We will handle the cleanup; they do not need to see it.”

“We are just at the Fire Tower Road entrance.” There was some talk on her end before she added, “Jade is going to come up with Monsoon.  She is going to help, but I think Mary and Abigail are not ready to see it.”  There was some additional discussion in the vehicle, “Vida is coming to help too.”

“That is fine.  Can you monitor the police channels?  Not sure if the gunshots were reported.”  I asked.

“There was an aetheric-masking formation over the area.  I think the Archbishop set it up to deal with you, but it ultimately helped us.  I will return after dropping everyone at the cabin,” Bedelia replied.

“No, stay with them.  Keep an eye on Rose, in particular.  The men responsible for controlling her are dead or gone, but we have no idea what she has been through for the last four months.  Talk to her and see if you can find out,” I advised.

Bedelia sounded reluctant but agreed, “Okay, but I think I should be scouting the area for others.  There are still eight Purists unaccounted for.  I will ask Rose and see if I can find out where they are.”

I hung up and began a grizzly clean-up job.  The dead bodies were dragged and placed together by their cars.  We had five Purists alive, and their eyes burned with hate.  We also had seven dead bodies.  Jade offered, “I have a catkin that runs a crematorium.  I can take care of the dead bodies.”

I gave it a lot of thought and considered everything.  I had friends and good standing with the Magus Arcanum.  “No, Jade.  I will call Dexter and explain what happened.  He already knows I am a demon.”

Jade tried to convince otherwise, “If you want help, you should call Dakkon.  He could take care of this and not involve the Magus Arcanum.”

“No,” I said and walked away to make the call.  The Magus Arcanum still owed me for the aboleth.

Dexter picked up immediately, “Mister Silverhorn.  Thank you for calling.  How can I help you?”

I cleared my throat, “Dexter, some members of the Purists attacked me.”

A concerned Dexter was taping away on a keyboard, “Purists?  Operating outside of the Middle East?” I waited as he looked. “Ah, I apologize Mister Silverhorn. They were here on a Wendigo Visa. Archbishop Esposito requested the Visas.”

I was curious what a Wendigo visa was.  Thankfully, I did not have to ask, “The Wendigo Visa is issued for a hunt of rare and dangerous creatures.  I am looking at it now.  It says they were hunting a Demonic Corrupter.”  Dexter actually laughed, which sounded odd.  “I am assuming that is you, Mister Silverhorn.”

“It was.  The Archbishop is dead, as well as a number of Purists.” My declaration had Dexter quiet on the phone as he typed on a keyboard.  Maybe I had called the wrong person.

“Mister Silverhorn, I am sending a team.  Just wait where you are.  They will handle everything, and I will contact the Vatican.  It looks like the Archbishop was not in good standing with them but still ordained.  After the team confirms your story, you will be free to leave.”  Dexter added, “Ninty minutes, and they will land in a helicopter nearby.  Thank you for calling me Mister Silverhorn.”

I hoped I had made the correct decision.  I told everyone, and we waited for the team from the Magus Arcanum.  I was in my adult body when they arrived on a military helicopter, as Dexter had said, and five men got off, all with upper-tier one cores and dressed in all-black fatigues.  One man identified me and approached me.  He stood before me as the helicopter spun down, and the other four men went to the dead bodies and prisoners, “Major Kirkland,” he offered his hand, and I shook it.  “Our mages will confirm the cause of death and question the Purists still alive.  I do not think you have much to worry about.  We know what role you played up in Boston.” He was referring to my help with the aboleth, which was good he knew.

As his men worked, I asked, “You said you were a major?”

“Yes, I work for the United States Army, Thirteenth SpecOps Group.  We help facilitate dealing with the supernatural and extraterrestrial,” he explained.

I was confused as I thought only the Magus Arcanum dealt with these things, “Do you work for the Magus Arcanum or the United States?”

The major, who was wearing just black fatigues and no weapons showing, said, “Both.  But more so the Magus Arcanum.  All in the Thirteenth are mages; technically, we do not exist in the Army hierarchy.  We are a ghost unit.”

One of his men approached to report, “Major, the foreign nationals are all part of the Purists.  The two dead Inquisitors were leading them.”

“Inquisitors and Purists working together?”  the Major questioned.

“Apparently, they came hunting him.” He pointed at me.  The Major nodded, and his subordinate went back to help move the bodies onto the helicopter.

I asked, “So what happens now?”

“The survivors will be sent to Gitmo as terrorists, and the bodies of the dead will be incinerated.”  He paused, “Maybe not the priests.  I will have to check on that.  But you are free to leave.”  I walked to Aurora, who had been leaning against the van the entire time watching with a blank face.

“Are you doing okay?”  I asked the woman who had murdered her oppressors.

Aurora seemed to give the question serious consideration, “Yes.  It felt good.  A weight has been removed, and the two men responsible for controlling me for two decades were brought to justice by my own hands.  Vigilante justice but deserved.”

I nodded but realized that as a demon, our nature was to bind people just as Aurora had been bound.  “I am happy you feel free, Aurora.  I am even happier you will be coming with me to Mercanious.  The power of your aetheric chains has greatly improved.”

She nodded and watched as the last body was loaded, and the helicopter spun up and took off.  She addressed me, “I might even be strong enough to hold you now, demon.”  A slight smirk formed and then quickly disappeared.

Aurora’s coldness was both scary and, for some reason, attractive to me.  The ice queen of bondage.  We left the vehicles as the Major was going to send someone to return the rentals.  Soon, we were all back in the cabin.  I had to explain to everyone that I had my ass kicked by an angel.  He had a weaker core but had trained his abilities to a much higher level than myself.

We also had a delusional Rose.  Even though her captors were killed, her mind still needed to be healed. She was lucid for a few minutes and then catatonic after.  Bedelia had her wrists bound just in case she had some programming done to her.  Mary had been talking with her whenever Rose had been able to focus.  We needed a powerful mage who specialized in mind magic to wipe her mind clean of the infiltration.  I felt sorry for Rose and that her family had essentially given her over to zealots.

I was sitting with Bedelia, “When do you think Rincewind will return?  He is the only person that can help Rose besides Lezerath?”

“I do not know anyone else with enough experience to purge her planted thoughts.  We should not keep her here, though,” Bedelia said.

Dexter called me an hour later and asked about the missing Purist, Rose Melanson.  I told him a brief story of how she became indoctrinated.  He also agreed Rincewind was the best mage for the job.  In the meantime, he offered to place Rose in protective care.  It was not Gitmo, just an asylum for supernaturals.  We all talked about it, but only Mary was opposed to locking Rose up. We decided that was best for her for now. Especially since I was leaving for Mercanious with four others.  A car arrived a few hours later for Rose and took her away.

We had solved every crisis so far, except for Andromeda.  Our next trip was to Wyoming and Devil’s Tower.  From there, Aurora, Iris, Bedelia, and I would hopefully travel across the stars to Mercanious.

I was in the master bedroom and planning what I should assimilate into my mind space to take with me when I walked in.  I was wearing a massive grin and had a familiar swagger of a certain catkin, “Artica?” I asked me.

“How did you guess?” She sounded irate.  “I was sure I was going to be able to convince you I was a hallucination.  Bedelia thought someone should pretend to be you while you are gone.”  She pointed her thumbs at herself.

“Is it an illusion or morphing charm?”  I asked.

“A morphing charm, but your equipment doesn’t work,” she crassily grabbed her crotch.

“I don’t know.  You will probably get me into more trouble,” I was joking, but not really.  She couldn’t take my exams, and I was concerned about her interacting with my parents.

“You are leaving me behind and put me in charge,” she challenged.

“Fine.  I trust you, Artica.  But how about you remove the device and help me store some life essence?”  My copy grinned and found it creepy.  I did not like talking to myself.  She thankfully took off a ring that activated the morphing disguise.   I needed to get as much life essence as possible before Mercanious.  I was going to keep everyone very busy for the next few days.