Chapter 93 Verbal Contract

I was lying there, and Artica woke first to a vibrating watch.  She had set an alarm and extracted herself from the sleeping bag.  She started stretching while Bedelia snored softly.  “I know you are awake,” Artica said.  “I think we all need a shower before we head to this crab cave.”

I chuckled and got out of the sleeping bag as well, leaving just an exhausted Bedelia.  “We can stop at a hotel.  What do you think of Bedelia?”

Artica looked down at her, and I could see she was drooling a bit in her sleep.  Artica considered and then said, “I definitely want her on our side.  She is good at what she does, and the others think she is a good teacher.  Is this about enhancing her?”

I slowly nodded, “Yes.” I admitted, “I have been warned not to trust anyone. Bedelia’s father is an administrator at the Magus Arcanum.”

Artica cocked her head and scrunched her brow, thinking.  I had just admitted I didn’t trust her.  Artica’s face got serious, “Then you should think about what you would gain.  You would enhance the range of her abilities and increase her strength, and if she is loyal, you will gain those abilities to use as you please.”  Artica walked and stood before me, “Know that I am loyal.”  Her tone was serious.  “Don’t think for a second I would betray you.”  Artica left the dilapidated shed, and I heard her start to climb out of the ravine.  Ok, I had just pissed off Artica.

I bent over and shook Bedelia awake. “Rise and shine,” I whispered.

“Five more minutes, dad,” she groaned and rolled over, ignoring me. Then as if lightning had struck, she got up, looking extremely embarrassed. Her eyes met mine, “Not a word, she said.” She quickly adjusted her belt and walked out. I put the bedroll into my mind space, made sure we hadn’t left any trash, and followed the pair up the slope.

When we got up to the road, we had to wait twenty minutes for Iris to come by and pick us up. I took over the driver’s seat and started the trip back. Iris asked, “So, how did it go?”

I answered, “The portal was in a deadly swamp. I think we are going to try the crab cave portal. We are going to scout it. It is a much longer walk but should be much safer.”

I told everyone about the village, and Bedelia offered, “Elves generally look down on humans. They are not as bad as vamps, but they rank humans lower in their society. They claim it is because humans have such short lifespans, so then humans are short of wisdom.”

In the passenger seat, Iris commented, “That swamp must have been nasty. You guys smell terrible.” Artica started laughing while I saw Bedelia go red-faced in the rearview mirror.

We stopped at a Red Roof Inn, showered, and then went out for breakfast at Cracker Barrel. We listened to music for the remainder of the drive, and Iris, who had a beautiful voice, serenaded us with Katie Perry and Miley Cyrus songs. The serious Iris apparently liked pop music and sung to herself when she studied.

We spent some time responding to texts when we reached the portal site. Around 1 pm on Sunday, we pulled onto the dirt road and walked to the familiar clearing where the portal was. My current aether was 338/1000, and it took 100 aether to open a portal. I had burned through almost seven hundred aether, putting gear into my mind space and exploring the Great Smokey Mountain National Park portal.

The sun was out, and we circled around the portal as we geared up once again. I then proceeded to open the portal and entered immediately into the dark cavern. Bedelia was second and went into her fugue state to scan the cavern. Artica and Iris entered together, and everyone was on alert. We had decided not to activate any lights until we were sure no enemies were nearby.

It was ten minutes before Bedelia returned to her body from scanning the room, “I didn’t see anything. No crabs or lizards or beastkin.” I nodded, and Iris created some light, and we moved toward the cave entrance. The smell of shit and urine was very prevalent as we got closer to the arc of light that signaled the exit.

Artica spoke, “They must have been here for a while. There are a lot of crab parts as well. They must have been harvesting the monsters in the cave.”

Bedelia added, “The far side of the cavern descends in a wide tunnel along a slow-moving stream. I am guessing it descends far into the earth. My ability cannot penetrate the rock. I will scan again when we get to the entrance.” Bedelia did so and eventually said, “Nothing outside. They cut down some trees, and the mess out there matches the mess in the cave.”

We exited the cave, and the smell and mess were visible. They must have liked peanut butter because dozens of empty jars were scattered on the ground. I said, “Let’s go make sure Danila is ok, and then we will return to the portal.”

We descended the rocky slope and entered the woods, which were eerily quiet. There were a number of burn marks on the trees from aether rifles. The beastkin bounty hunters or, more likely, raiders had no inclination to abide by the leave-no-trace method. Guess they were never in the Boy Scouts. Halfway to the elven tree house, we started to see some signs of forest of life in the forest as critters scuttled in the brush and trees.

When we arrived at the tree house, we were shocked to find it mostly destroyed. It looked like a wrecking ball had smashed the structure. Splintered wood was scattered in a wide berth from the home tree. My heart sank as the beastkin had also looted the house—no, Danila. “I think I might know where she is,” I said after with spent a few minutes sifting through the debris.

I led the group to the hideout that Kiri and Mardina had shown me. The entrance between the large roots was sealed. I didn’t know what to do, so I just yelled, “Danila?”

We waited for a long time, and I started to get worried. Maybe she hadn’t made it here. I looked to the others for support. Bedelia couldn’t use her ability to penetrate the ground and through the roots. Should we dig? What was I going to tell Kiri and Eilina? I finally decided to leave, “We will head back to the cave.”

“Leaving so soon?” Danila’s voice filtered down from the tree.

We all looked up but didn’t see her. Then Danila walked out of the trunk of the tree in front of us. She explained, “They left four days ago. We have been waiting in case they planned to return, but it is unlikely.”

Artica said, “They left the place a mess.”

Danila nodded, “I know, I can use the trees to see and watch them,” her face displayed rage, “Borseen and Laith are still in the refuge. They tried to flee but ended up staying with me,” She waved her hand, and the passage between the roots opened.

“I am glad you are ok, Caleb. I didn’t think you were going to be able to outrun them. And then you come back to check up on me,” Danila’s face had a sensual smirk. Borseen and Laith came out from under the tree.

I asked, concerned, “Are you going to be ok? Your home has been destroyed, Danila.”

Danila had a soft laugh, “It is not the first time. It will take a few months, but I will rebuild. Laith and Borseen will leave today to trade the package you dropped off last time you were here.”

That package would be the incubus tier 2 aphrodisiac saliva tabs. The two male elves looked like they had their backpacks and were ready to leave immediately. Being confined under a tree for weeks was probably not pleasant. I turned to Danila, “You are welcome to join us on Earth. You would get lonely here alone.”

She smiled, “What? You don’t plan to visit me regularly?” She caressed my arm. Artica was on guard and moved to interpose protectively, but I waved her off. “I see you picked yourself up a new pet cat,” she teased Artica who didn’t look amused. Her face turned serious, “No, if I went to Earth, I would be uncomfortable with the aether density there. Also, it would make it easier for her father, Bastian, to track her.”

Iris interrupted, “We still need to get to Kealon City. We think my parents were abducted from there.” Danila’s eyes went up.

She looked at her sons, who were supposed to be our guides. She considered and said, “I will be your guide. When you are ready, I will guide you there. I don’t want my family to be held here any longer. The beastkin were sent here by Bastian.”

The alarm on my face got a smirk from Danila, “Caleb, they were not looking for Eilina. They were hoping to harvest the Matron Crab for the aether crystal and sell it to Basitan Alaire’s family. I listened to the beastkin conversations when they walked through the forest. They were extremely angry with the lack of monsters in the cave and didn’t want to return empty-handed.” She smiled, “It was quite amusing, and unfortunately, they took out their anger on my housefiguring I was responsible.”

Danila started to walk, and we all followed her back to her house. When we arrived, she pursed her lips, “Yes, it is quite the mess. Give me a moment to send the boys off.” Danila went to the Borseen and Laith and handed them a few things before they walked away. When she returned to us, she smiled, “They will set up an account in the city so we can get you your portion of the funds for tabs.”

I had forgotten that I had negotiated a portion of the sales. Well, forgotten was too strong a word as everything I did seemed to generate money for more. I asked, “What is the currency? Silver? Gold?”

Danila nodded, “Copper, silver, and gold are standard. Quarter, half, and full-ounce coins are the accepted denominations for each metal coin. Depending on where you are in the transit will determine what image is on the coins.”

Bedelia nodded, agreeing, “Yeah, but they still value aether crystals more than gold.”

“I concede your point,” Danilla said. “The commoners deal in metallic coins, while the wealthy prefer crystals. Unless you wish to leave now, Caleb, the funds should be ready for you when I guide you to the city.”

I looked at my group. Iris looked ready to leave while Bedelia and Artica looked indifferent, “No, we will be back soon, though. We just want to confirm that the Cartwright’s were abducted there. If they were, then we have to find a way to planet Mercanious.”

Danila’s eyes went up, “Mercanious? Wow? The orcs are fairly embedded in that transit thread. They don’t like outsiders either.” She seemed to consider, “Well, if you have transportation, I haven’t had a vacation in a while.”

My jaw didn’t work, but Iris agreed for us, “Thank you!” And she rushed forward to hug Danila.

Danila patted her back as Iris squeezed her, “It really is not a big deal. You did me a favor by hiding Eilina. Helping you find your parents is the least I could do.”

A few moments later, as we were getting ready to leave, I was alone with Danila, “Caleb, thank you for what you did for me. My power has increased drastically, and I feel 100 years old again. You did the same for Mardina and Kiri. Has Eilina’s core been augmented?”

I had given Danila the endurance seed and raised her aether core from 1.20 to 1.58 the last time I visited. She was now an upper tier 2 frost druid, which meant she was one of the most powerful beings in this transit. I spoke softly, “No, but Kiri has green-lit it and said she was ready. The problem is that you asked me not to sully her, making enhancing more difficult.”

Danila replied quickly, “No, don’t hold back. It is for her own good. You have done so much for my family. This is just another debt I will need to repay. Now if you don’t mind, I need to create some wood golems to clean up the mess the beastkin have made.”

We walked as a group back to the cave. Artica and Iris were talking excitedly about visiting the elven city on the next visit. Bedelia was next to me and spoke softly, “I…I was awake. Last night.”

I laughed, “I know you snore like a drunken sailor. You stopped snoring, so we knew.”

“What?” Bedelia punched me, “I. Do. Not. Snore!” I whipped out my phone and played the video which made her speechless. It was from the last time we visited Danila, but she was clearly snoring extremely loudly in the video and turning red in embarrassment.

Since she was speechless, I asked, “So I am ready to enhance your core.” She stopped walking, surprised at my statement. I waved her to continue walking next to me, “You have two choices. We can do it over time which should get you a sizable increase. Or we can do it all in one shot. It will not be as large but still substantial.”

Bedelia started asking me a number of questions. How many sessions? How big of an enhancement? What would the session entail? What was she going to have to pay?

I was considering experimenting on Bedelia. Trying to raise her core without having intercourse. This was because I was trying to find a way to increase my sister’s core. I thought Bedelia would be pragmatic and patient, so I was almost certain she would go with the slow route.

We entered the cave, and Iris made some lights. Artica remained on alert. Bedelia asked, “You improved your bodyguard. What was her aether core change? Was it in a single session?”

I watched the white-haired catkin, her hips swaying in front of us as she scanned the ceiling stalactites and floor stalagmites for enemies. I wasn’t sure if I should volunteer this information. I asked, “Are you in? Twenty years of loyalty? I will not force you to do anything, but you can never reveal my secrets.”

The pause was too long for my liking. She finally said, “I...I agree.” She sounded a little resigned. I still hadn’t told her I didn’t have the ability to make a blood-binding demon contract.

I nodded, trusting her, “Artica’s core went from 0.45 to 1.02.”

“Bullshit!” I handed her my bracer to confirm Artica’s current aether core. Her mind was spinning. “Damn, that cat has the same sized aether core as me!” She sounded excited now, thinking about the possibilities. “How about Iris?”

It took a moment to remember, “Iris was 0.104 to 0.426.” Bedelia nodded thoughtfully as she had already done readings on Iris’ core.

She was quiet as I created the portal and brought us back to Earth. I drove to Iris’ house while they talked about our adventures. When we got there, Bedelia asked to talk to me alone. Iris and Artica left us in the car, and Bedelia laid out her request, “I agree to twenty years. But if you raise my core to over 1.5, I will be willing to be subordinate to you for twenty-five years.”

I laughed, “What if I raise your core over 2.0?” I was joking, but Bedelia had a serious look like she was doing the math in her head.

“One hundred years,” she said seriously, and added, “My life span would be measured in centuries if my core passed into the third tier. A century of service would be acceptable.” I nodded but was in disbelief at her offer.

“How does that work? Life span related to aether cores?” I asked. I hadn’t read anything about it in the books from Iris’ library.

Bedelia had an answer ready, “Upper-tier one humans are usually good for 100 years. Lower tier two humans….150 years is probably average. When you reach upper tier 2 things start to get skewed, somewhere between 200 and 400 years. Tier 3…at least 500 years but probably longer. But you need to understand that compared to the actual age of everything, human life spans are just a flash in the pan.”

My mind turned inward—my parents, my sister. Bedelia read my thoughts, “You are thinking about your family. There are other ways to extend human life spans. Alchemists in the transits and higher layers have the means, some magical, some technological. It is one of the reasons people risk traveling the transits.”

That gave me something to strive for. I was happy for the knowledge and advice. “So when do we formalize the contract and begin?” Bedelia asked while breaking out in goosebumps and her arm hair standing on end. “We should also talk about Carrie. If you raise her core…she has the gift of foresight, Caleb. I said I would be your seer….Carrie is an actual seer; her core is too weak to use the foresight power.”

I hadn’t given much thought about Carrie. She was the artist from school that Bedelia had mixed in when teaching everyone magic. She was extremely weak, just 0.11. I acknowledged, “If Carrie wants her core increased, I am willing. Let’s start working on your core after school tomorrow.” Bedelia swallowed hard but nodded in anticipation.

Bedelia got out, and Artica in. I drove Artica to her hotel and then went home. I was still in time to have dinner with my parents.