Chapter 75

Once I narrowed the creature down to the Aboleth, I researched it thoroughly on the site. They were monstrous creatures that dwelled in deep watery environments. An Aboleth measures over 20 feet in length and has three slit-like eyes on a bony ridge. The body of the creature is fish-like with multiple appendages, like an octopus.

They had incredible intelligence and bound lesser creatures to their will. An Aboleth could enslave a lesser creature and feed off its aether core until that core ruptured. This was why I assumed this was what was enthralling Lilian. Lilian’s core looked like it had been chewed on by something, like a dog’s favorite toy.

They were dangerous creatures and had tier 3 cores when born and could mature as high as tier 6. This was way out of my league the more I read about its abilities. I guessed the creature was in Boston, where Lilian went to school. This was due to the fact that the enthralled victims usually only lasted about a year under an Aboleth’s care.

I wasn’t sure if I could save Lilian. Breaking the enthrallment needed powerful magics or the slaying of the Aboleth itself to free it. Neither of which I was capable of.

In the early morning, I played a number of things through in my head to resolve Lilian’s trouble. Eventually, I picked up my Apollyon phone and dialed Dexter. It was 6:09 am, and maybe I should have waited, but Dexter picked up after just one ring, “Mr. Silverhorn, what can I do for you?”

I had prepared my words carefully, “Dexter, I believe I may have found signs of an Aboleth in the United States.”

A long pause on the other end. Had I finally stumped the cool and collected Dexter? He finally spoke, “That is quite the assertion, Mr. Silverhorn. What evidence are you offering?”

I spoke slowly, “I encountered a woman I suspect is under the influence of such a creature. It was in Boston. Her name is Lilian Holland.”

I waited, a few keystrokes audible on the phone, and then Dexter said, “I have one Lillian Holland attending Boston University.”

“That should be her. She had a BU sweatshirt on when I encountered her,” I said with confidence.

Dexter taped on his keys on the other end of the line, “Thank you Mr. Silverhorn. I will contact the appropriate authorities to look into this matter. If it is confirmed, then I will let you know.” He ended the call with some concern in his voice.

I continued to page through the aboleth research. These creatures took over entire cities and had the capacity to puppet hundreds of citizens if given enough time. Their origin was mired in myth. There was only one account of someone speaking to an aboleth. It was from an ancient aboleth on the 16th layer. This particular aboleth claimed their species predated something called the Great Descent. It said the descent was when the first layer dropped to create twenty-two new layers below it. This conversation was all supposedly recorded before the force of 200 demis slaughtered the beast. The only weakness an aboleth had was it could only enthrall one person every twelve hours. But as an aboleth grew in power, that cooldown time decreased. So to destroy them, you had to come at them in force and surprise them so their minions couldn’t interfere.

It was also scary how strong their hold was over their thralls. It took a tier 4 mage to break the hold. And even then, it was not assured the thrall wouldn’t go crazy. Thralls had their minds linked to an aboleth over any distance. When the link was about to be broken, the aboleth would force memories into the thrall, driving them mad. All this didn’t bode well for Lilian. I also was slightly worried that maybe my attempt to charm Lilian had been noticed by the aboleth.

I left my room worried about the aboleth and there being even more creatures out there I wasn’t aware of. I walked downstairs for breakfast. It was Christmas Eve. That meant we would be putting up a Christmas tree today. I was making waffles when Paige and Lilian came downstairs. Both were smiling conspiratorially. Paige asked, “Are you going to make us some gourmet waffles?”

“Sure, Gourmet Eggo Buttermilk or Gourmet Eggo Brown Cinnamon?” I asked with as much humor as I could muster. I looked pityingly at Lilian. I couldn’t save her. Maybe the Magus Arcanum could. Maybe I was wrong in my assumption that she was enslaved by an aboleth.

I made a few rounds of waffles, and then Paige left to bring Lilian home. When she got back, my family decorated the tree and had Chinese food delivered for an early lunch. My parents were going to a fancy car dealership Christmas Eve party, so Paige and I were left home.

“Do you want to watch *A Christmas Story*,” Paige asked after our parents had left. I agreed, made some popcorn, and sat on the couch to watch the movie.

Paige laid along the length of the couch and her feet pressed into my thigh as I was at the end.  As the movie started I asked Paige absently, “Does your friend Lilian seem different to you? Acting weird?”

Paige kicked me softly, “Because she wouldn’t succumb to your advances?  She told me that you tested her at her house and this morning when she came out of the bathroom.  Just because one of my friends won’t drop her pants for you think she is weird.”

Worried, I made eye contact with Paige, looked over her aether core, and ensured she wasn’t under the influence of the ability.  Thankfully she was clear of any outside influence.  I added, “Yeah, after the lingerie show, I thought I had a shot.  I guess I should have known better.  After all, my own sister strutted her goods in front of me as well.”

She kicked me harder, “Don’t tell mom and dad about that.  I don’t know why I did that.”  She paused, “Do you think your sister is hot?” She asked cautiously.

I didn’t hesitate, “You are gorgeous, Paige.  You can get any guy you want.” I smirked and added, “But I might just tell mom you strutted in front of me while trying on bras.”

Paige’s eyes narrowed, “You wouldn’t dare.  I can still kick your ass!” She added jokingly.

“Not a chance Paige.  I have added 30 pounds of muscle in the last few months.  You will not abuse me again on this couch,” I said, challenging her.  We used to wrestle all time, and she did kick my ass.  The last time was when she came back from her freshman year.  She had spent a lot of time lifting weights and pinned me easily.  That was seven months ago.

I was expecting it when Paige swung her legs to the floor and lunged at me. Normally she would press me into the cushions and then pin me with her 170 lb muscled form.  I let her come at me and dodged her.  The surprise on her face as I got out of the way was priceless. She turned, but I was already pressing her down into the plush pillows.  There was a brief bit of hand-fighting and Paige was on her back.  I straddled her stomach, immobilizing her.  She struggled for a few seconds.

Normally she would keep me pinned for a few long minutes.  I wasn’t planning to do the same.  Paige rasped, slightly out of breath from the brief, intense effort, “Are you even my brother?”  There was a mix of irritation and disbelief in her voice.

Damn.  Paige was skeptical about me.  I was right; she had been testing me. And I had failed.  My mind was full of a thousand things.  I used to call and talk to Paige at least two times a week, and now we only texted.  Even my relationship with my parents had degraded.  If I had paid attention, I would have realized how I was distancing myself from my family.

I hadn’t said anything, so Paige asked, “Are you going to get off of me?”

My face slowly changed to a sly grin, “Paige remember my thirteenth birthday?”  Paige’s eyes went wide in panic.

“You wouldn’t dare!” She said, but a smile had returned to her face.  On my thirteenth birthday, she had wrestled and pinned me, and when I whined, she tickled me till I peed my pants.  This type of sibling play was typical for us and more like my old self.

I started at her ribs and moved up to armpits as she squirmed under me.  She started screeching, which soon turned to begging me to stop.  She didn’t stop on my fourteenth birthday and I proceeded to get her bladder to release.  We both had jeans on, so the couch should be safe.  It took less than two minutes before Paige screamed, “You win!  I have to pee!  Let me up!”  She was laughing during her proclamation.  I stopped and let her go.  She caught her breath and went to the bathroom.  I could hear her peeing, so she wasn’t lying.

She came back and sat down next to me.  I remained on guard in case she tried for some payback.  The movie was still playing.  Paige said, “Just peed a little, but you definitely won.” She said, conceding defeat.  My incubus senses could smell Paige’s urine and…her arousal.  She had enjoyed our match more than a little.   Paige sighed, “So, are you going to tell me the truth? Why are you so…different?”

I was conflicted.  My secret wasn’t really a secret as everyone at Iris’ house knew some part of my secret.  I eventually said, “What do you want to know, Paige?  I will tell you the truth.”  I might have to charm her and make her forget if her reaction was too off the rails.

Paige studied me and finally asked a question, “Why are you concerned about Lilian?”

It was not the first question I was expecting, “She has been enthralled.  A creature, a very dangerous creature, has taken over her mind.  I think she still has her memories, though.”

Paige’s face was skeptical.  I added, “Magic is real, Paige.  Watch me.”  I slowly aged myself forward, watching Paige’s eyes get wider and wider.  She leaned forward and touched my face, not believing it.

Paige turned off the TV as she stood.  “What the fuck, Caleb?  How the hell did you get magic?  Is that why you are so fucking sexy and athletic now?”  Paige looked incredulous.  I was beginning to think I had made a mistake and was getting ready to charm Paige and make her forget.  Paige asked, “Do I have magic too?  I mean, we are related, so I should have magic too?”  She sounded hopeful.  Well, she did love the Harry Potter books.  She read all the books every summer since she was 12 as a vacation for her mind after putting 110% effort into school and rowing.

“No, I don’t think you have access to magic,” I said seriously.  I pointed my bracer at Paige and read her core, 0.26.  “You have just a lower tier 1 core.  Very basic and not very strong.”

Paige was nodding even though her face said she didn’t understand.  Her next question was off script, “Caleb did you use your magic to seduce Maya and Ashley?”  She was serious, and I think she was judging me.

“Really, Paige?  That is your question.  No, I didn’t seduce them.  They came to my room on their own.  You practically tricked Ashley to my room, and Maya…well, Maya has magic herself.” I explained to my sister.

Paige seemed to consider my words.  She seemed unable to form her next question, then finally asked, “How is everything so secret?  Are there wizards running around casting the *obliviate* spells on people?” I think the *obliviate* spell was something from Harry Potter. I read the series once but didn’t remember the details like Piage.

I shook my head no, “It is TV, radio, and movies, from what Iris has told me.  Anyone with a lesser tier 1 core is susceptible to some type of geas spell.  It makes the person filter out what they are actually seeing and hearing and putting it in a context they understand.”

“I’m calling bullshit,” Paige said as a knee-jerk response to something too fantastical to believe.

“I don’t know what to tell you.  I haven’t watched a lot of TV since becoming….a wizard. Wait here,” I said, leaving Paige.  It wasn’t going as badly as it could have.  I got my Apollyon phone and came back downstairs to sit with Paige, who looked a little shell-shocked.

“This phone has access to the wizard database,” I said, and Paige’s eyes locked onto the phone.  I opened the app with my black card and went online.  “So Paige, about 4,000 people go missing in North America every year that are not found.  The number is actually higher…but here, look at this.” I gave her my phone, and she looked at the Magus Arcanum news feeds.

There was article after article of deaths from various creatures. I leaned in close as she paged through them. After an hour, she was still reading headlines. I asked Paige, “Are you alright?”

Paige looked at me, “No, I am not fucking alright.” She moved the screen to a demographic study of deaths in the entire world. “This says some stupid magical organization out there is tracking deaths of people by magical creatures.” She shoved it in my face, and it read last year’s data, 29,558 confirmed deaths. True estimate 87,810 deaths worldwide. I scanned the screen quickly, and it looked like wars and natural disasters covered up a lot of suspected monster events.

Paige was angry, “Why don’t they do anything about it?” She tossed the phone at me. “Are they going to help Lilian?”

I took the phone and didn’t see anything from Dexter. “I don’t know. I just told them a few hours ago. There is a lot more to this than you know.” I took a deep breath. “Humans are at the bottom of the food chain. Literally, the bottom. There are twenty-two other…realities above us.” I was trying to make this as simple as possible for my sister to understand, but I knew she was going to want lots and lots of details. “There are…passageways that connect these realities. They are extremely difficult to enter.”

I was trying to decide what to say next, but Paige asked, “Have you gone into these passageways yourself?” I couldn’t read Paige. Her face was either showing excitement, fear, contemplation, or a mix of all three. If I said yes, then she would probably want to go, and I didn’t want to put her at risk.

I decided the truth was my best approach, “Yes. I can open the portals once I gather enough aether. Aether is what people call magical energy. It is very thin of this layer, so it takes me a long time time to accumulate.”

Paige thought and asked, “How did you become a wizard? Can you do the same for me?” The eagerness in her eyes made me want to tell her the truth, but I deflected.

“I don’t think the method I used will be of use to you. An extremely powerful being bestowed my powers on me. I am just an experiment for me, a toy or plaything. I actually don’t know what I am to her.” I sighed, “Paige, if I ever disappear….”

“If you disappear bro, I will find you and kick your ass for not telling me where you were going,” she offered a smile. Her mind was sorting things out, and her face was relaxing.

Paige was about to lay into me with a thousand questions when we heard our parents coming home by the garage door opening. She asked, “Do they know?” I shook my head no. She nodded with a small smirk. I had trusted Paige first with my secret.

“Ok, let us go to your room, and you are going to tell me everything,” Paige eagerly said.

I didn’t want to spend hours with Paige and possibly letting something slip. I offered, “I have a better idea. I can bring you to my girlfriend’s house.” There are a few people there that can explain this just as well as I can.

Mom and dad walked in, and we both smiled, “Hey guys, I am bringing Paige over to meet Iris. I have to drop off my Christmas gift for her too. We might crash there tonight and have dinner with her as her parents are not there.” Dad looked at mom, and she shrugged.

“Ok, Caleb. Paige, keep an eye on your brother. Iris is a nice girl. If you find our son is doing anything untoward, you will let us know,” he said with a joking addendum. We both offered weak smiles and grabbed our coats, and left.

We took Paige’s jeep, and it gave me time to text everyone at the house to prepare for the arrival. I learned Carrie had gone home, but Mary and Bedelia were still there. So it was a full house. I had enough iPads to go around, I think. When we arrived, Paige eagerly got out of the car, but I asked her to help me carry the iPads in.

“Did you rob an Apple store, Caleb? And if these are presents, you really should have at least wrapped them. How many girlfriends do you have?” she asked jokingly.

I groaned, “Too many.” Her eyes flashed to me and then to the bags.

“You mean—all of these are each for a different….” Paige was in shock and trying to count the ipads in the bags when Eilina opened the door, clearly sporting her elven ears.

“Welcome, Paige!” She embraced my shocked sister, who clearly saw her ears. Paige walked numbly into the house. Iris was just inside, and she asked.

“Was that too much? We thought elves were easier for someone to see than an orc. Vida’s true form didn’t go over that great with Carrie, so I thought….” Iris stated.

“No, it is fine. Ripping the bandaid off is probably best. So can you all teach Paige about everything and not tell her I am a…you know?” I said.

“We can do that. But can you slow down a bit? It took half a day for Mary and a whole day for Carrie. We would like some time to ourselves.” I handed the bags to Iris, and she looked inside. “You really should have wrapped them, Caleb. It doesn’t feel like Christmas if we don’t open them. I will go wrap them!” Iris took all the bags and went upstairs excitedly.

Paige was already seated between Bedelia and Kiri on the sofa, and they were answering her questions. I was thinking about leaving when Mary approached me, “Caleb, there is a problem.” She said solemnly.

“Of course, there is,” I mumbled.