I took an unnecessary nap in the real world.  I dreamed of adding a disguise ability as a male elf and going to the elf city to look for Iris’ parents.  While in the city, I opened a brothel and harvested thousands of life essence from female elves in heat.  I woke from a short nap and checked the clock.  5:02 AM.  I didn’t feel like doing any work.  I didn’t have to be at the rink till 9:30, so I had four hours to kill.

I drove south to the state forest and parked.  I stripped to my underwear and transformed into my incubus form.  I took flight into the trees, practicing my maneuvering.  The ground still had a good amount of snow on it, and since it was quiet, I surprised deer and other forest critters with my stealth flying.  Flying was definitely freeing.  Feeling better, I drove to the hockey rink.  I was only a few minutes early, so there were a number of my teammates already dressing.  James came up to me, “Caleb, there is a party at my house tonight. Are you up for it?”

“Sorry, James, I have to meet some friends after the game, and we are going on a short road trip,” I canceled any further inquiries.

I went through the motions of getting prepped and skating.  The game did not go as planned.  We lost two defense players early in the first period to injuries, and a third player was thrown from the game for fighting.  Our opponents were assholes and had two of their players ejected as well.  They targeted me half a dozen times, and I almost lost my temper.  It was a game that had a steady cycle of players to the penalty box.  We won 7-2, but it felt more like a brawl than a hockey game.

The stands were half full. Iris, Abigail, Vida, Bedelia, and Kiri sat together.  I could see a few groups of guys hitting on the group during the game.  What irked me the most, though, was Bedelia looked to be having a good time.  Rumor was a few college scouts were also sprinkled in the stands as well.  I didn’t notice them, though.  There were too many parents also recording the game.

After the game, I quickly switched to street clothes and talked with my parents.  I told them I was going to Iris’ house and would be home tomorrow night.  That would give us 30 hours in the transit.  All the survival gear I had purchased at the army surplus store was in a duffle in the back of my car.  This was meant for the long trek to the elven city, which was still on hold.  If I remember correctly, we were not supposed to take Kiri’s sister until after we were guided to the elven city.  But Iris had not voiced a complaint.

With my dream of being an elven male administering to the needs of a multitude of elven women fresh in my mind, I thought getting an elven male shapeshift form an important preparatory step for the trip.  My mind turned to Bedelia.

How was I going to deal with the mage?  I liked the idea of ditching her in the transit.  But she might find a way back to Earth and make things worse. It hadn’t gotten to the point that killing her was an option.  I don’t think I could do it anyway.  Was there even a problem?

She was being nosy and knew about Vida.  She had connections to the upper levels of the Magus Acanium.  She also had disturbing scrying abilities.  I think that is what put me on edge the most.  Not knowing if she was watching me.  Had she seen me go flying this morning?  I probably should have been more cautious, but I needed a release.

I drove myself to Iris’ house, and no one was there.  I texted Abigail, and she immediately said they had detoured to Taco Bell for food.  She asked if I wanted anything, and I declined.  I went upstairs, used Iris’ shower, and changed into army fatigues.  I was in the kitchen getting some apple juice when the front door opened.

The smell of fast food washed over me and almost made me sick.  It was the number of preservatives in the food.  They moved into the kitchen and started eating at the table. Iris got cups and brought out beverages from the much better-stocked fridge now that Abigail was living here.  Abigail was picking at a taco salad.  They had gotten me a five-pack of tacos, but I just told them I had eaten already and put it in the fridge.

They talked as they ate, and I was fascinated by the mundane conversation.  They talked about the best hiking shoes, the best fast food places, the best bras for workouts, and the Netflix show *Emily in Paris,* which everyone, including Bedelia, was apparently watching.  We were about to go to another plane of existence, and this is what the woman discussed.

I watched Bedelia mostly.  I was looking for signs she had some suspicion of what I was.  Kiri finished and let out a long belch which was met by laughs.

I asked, “So, Bedelia, how does your scrying spell work?” Everyone paused to listen to the answer.

Bedelia started, “I would prefer to be called Yasmin.” Seeing my uncaring look, she continued, “If an object is in my range….”

I interrupted, “What is your range?”

Bedelia said, “Ten miles….”

I interrupted again, “Radius or planar?” Yeah, I didn’t think I was that smart, but it was the first thing that popped into my mind as being a valid reason to interrupt her.

She didn’t continue immediately, just stared at me.  Finally, she said, “It is a narrow cone, like a flashlight beam.”  She waited for me to interrupt, and when I didn’t, continued, “if the object is in my view, it flashes.  Then I can zoom in and out, getting a clearer picture.”  She stopped, so I felt I needed to ask more questions.

“Can you see through objects?  Is there anything that can obstruct your vision?  How many times a day can you use your ability?  Is it your only spying ability?” Iris kicked my shin.  I wasn’t being mean and barely felt it, so I just looked at Bedelia, waiting for my answers.

She obliged, “Most objects I can see through.  Any type of metal is a barrier, though.  So I can not penetrate rock with iron.” She paused, but I could tell she was framing her next answer.  “I can use my ability for about an hour a day.  It does take aether to use.  In the transit, I should be able to use it more freely with the higher aether density. And I do have other abilities, but I will not be revealing them. Unless you want to tell me all your secrets, Caleb.” She wore a mischievous mask.

I soured. “We should go. We will take my car.” Abigail and Vida were staying at the house, so Kiri took the passenger seat while Bedelia and Iris were in the back.

“So, is Caleb going to open the portal?” Bedelia asked.

Kiri responded, “He has a device that makes it possible.”

The drive to the site had Iris and Bedelia talking quietly in the back seat.  Iris had been won over by the chance of finding her parents sooner.  I asked a question, “Bedelia can you find transit portals with your ability?”

She answered, “Only if they are open.  My spell is not powerful enough to penetrate the veil.  How did you find your portal?”

I answered quickly, “Notes left by Iris’ parents.  There is a second site where a portal is located, but we haven’t headed there yet.  This site opens into a cave with crabs.”

“That is what Iris said. Cave crabs.  A common enough monster, slow and susceptible to burgeoning weapons,” Bedelia said pedantically.

Kiri stated, “Your two tetsubo should make short work of them, Caleb.  There shouldn’t be many crabs now that the matron is dead.”

“Yeah, I am hoping not to get covered in crab blood again,” I said while parking the car on the dirt road near the portal.

Hopefully, no one would do anything to my car while we were in the transit.  The road didn’t look used at all.

As we walked to the clearing, I could clearly see the portal, and when we approached it, I walked to it and reached into my pocket.  Bedelia tried to see what I pulled out, but I concealed it in my hand.  With my other hand, I touched the portal and opened it after funneling the aether into it. I actually had enough aether to port to the other end and directly enter the 22nd layer.  It was not something I planned to do until I was much stronger.

I stepped through without looking back at the woman.   I pulled a club into each hand.  Inside I scanned the area, looking for crabs.  I didn’t see anything moving.  Kiri was second and was on alert.  Bedelia and Iris followed a few seconds later, with Iris bringing her magical light.  Bedelia’s eyes went white while she searched.  I wasn’t sure what she was searching for.

I circled the site as the portal collapsed.  Something was wrong.  Where were all the crab shells?  Did the other crabs eat them?  Some weird animal footprints were on the dusty earth.  “Guys, it looks like a new monster has moved in.”  Kiri came over and kneeled.

Kiri touched the marks, “Stone lizard.  Their jaw strength is immense.  They are solitary creatures, though,” she stood and looked around.   “They do have excellent camouflage.”

We all began scanning the room.  Bedelia came out of her trance, “Sorry, I don’t see any links to your parents nearby, Iris.  The stone is preventing me from getting much range.”

Kiri, not sure if Bedalia heard in her trance, said, “Stone lizard nearby.  A large one, maybe 12 feet in length.”  A shocked Bedelia closed her eyes and opened them again to whites.

She mumbled, “It is 100 yards that way,” she pointed in a direction.  “It is slowly moving toward us.”

I looked in the direction she indicated, and in the distance, I could see it if I focused.  I had to admit that Bedelia was useful to have around.  “Are they fast?” I asked.

Kiri answered, “No, ambush predators.”

“Should we kill it or run to the entrance?  Any weak points?” I asked as I put myself between the girls and the oncoming threat.  I gripped my tetsubo.

Kiri was orienting herself toward the entrance, “We should probably kill it.  I haven’t fought one before, but they have tough skin.  If you can bash it’s ear canal on the side if it’s head it should stun it.”

“Got it,” I said, moving into the darkness away from the light.

Bedelia called after me, “Where are you going?  Rule number one is never split the party!“ Kirk was pulling her toward the cave entrance with Iris.

As I moved toward the lizard, I trained all my senses toward it, ignoring the girls.  The lizard became clearer in my sight.  Its body wasn’t that big, about the size of a person, and the tail was maybe ten feet trailing behind it.  It seemed interested in me, and we moved at each other on a collision course.

We reached each other on level terrain, and I thought this was going to be easy.  I confidently moved in for the kill.  The bastard’s tongue lashed out around my right arm.  It yanked me forward, and I fell down.  That tongue had to be 15’ long.  It moved in to bite me, but I managed a kick to the side of its head and righted myself.  The club in my left hand took an overhead swing and crash into its skull, stunning it.  Two more strikes and brain matter was oozing out its eyes.

I removed the tongue from around my arm and was disappointed to find the tongue had some type of acid as my fatigues had burned away.  I took off my top and cleaned my arm as best I could.  My skin was slightly pink but not damaged.  I hadn’t brought any spare clothes, damn it.  In frustration, I smashed the beast’s head twice more.

I moved to catch up with everyone.  I was hoping to have Iris get the core.  I think it was an upper-tier 1 beast, so that was $20,000 cash sitting there. It wasn’t hard to catch up with Iris’ bobbing light in the distance.

“Where is your shirt?” Iris asked as I caught them.

“The lizard had some type of corrosive spit on its tongue. I’m fine, and it is dead. Do you have your monster core collecter Iris?” My naked upper body was under examination, but the woman, especially Bedelia, whom hadn’t seen it yet.

Kiri said, “Shit, sorry Caleb it must have been a water lizard. The tracks look the same and I assumed due to the environment it was a stone lizard.”

Iris bandished the device and handed it to me, “Just a trickle of aether channeled into it, and it will pull the crystal from a dead beast. We will meet you by the entrance.”

I took the device and returned to my kill to harvest the crystal. It was just as she said. A small tickle of aether and the device pulled the crystal out. I pocketed it. My kill, my loot.

I found the girls at the cave entrance staring at the beauty of the transit. Bedelia was enthralled by the sky and Kiri looked wistfully at the forest below.

Bedelia said, “That is amazing. The videos I have seen don’t do it justice. This has been the best vacation ever.”

I saw a crab climbing over the rocks and smashed it with my club, sending it flying down the slope. Kiri said, “Since the matron was killed, the lizard must be snacking on the crabs. The cave ecosystem must be changing.”

“Let’s go see your mother. Bedelia, you can use your scrying ability when we get there. The plan is to stay the night there and then return. My device will take about 12 hours to recharge in order to open the portal again,” I bluffed with the last statement.

The trip down the slope had a half dozen crabs popping up that I dispatched and took their crystals. Iris’ device was quite handy. When we got to the woods, Kiri took the lead, and we followed. Her sister Mardina met us halfway to the treehouse.

They immediately began talking quickly to each other in elvish, and I was at a loss. Kiri turned to us, “All is well. The crabs have been numerous in the forest, but other than that nothing has happened.” We followed the sisters as they continued to talk in elvish. They had some soft laughs, and Mardina did turn once to study me after Kiri had said something interesting.

The tree house looked the same, and I thought this was going to be an easy trip besides almost losing my arm to a lizard. Danila met us, and we sat down for tea. Eilina was bouncing around, excited to be away and return to Earth. Borseen and Laith had ventured to the city to seek out clues of Iris’ parents. We ate food that we had brought with us and were shown to the room on the third floor. Bedalia asked to be left undisturbed while she did her scrying.

Kiri asked if I would be interested in a weapons training session with her and Mardina. The suggestive tone told me this was going to be more than just weapons training. I eagerly left with them to the private and secluded spot Kiri had mentioned. Both sisters had to tell Eilina twice that her presence was not welcome and that she should entertain Bedelia and Iris while we were training. I hoped this was going to be a profitable life essence harvest.