

## Chapter 20

“You can’t be serious,” the kangaroo responded to the seal proclamation in dismay, and she looked back at him uncomprehendingly.

“I can,” she replied.

“I can’t fix that...” he gesticulated toward the broken sword on the coffee table. “Thing.” Grant looked like the word was coated with glass coming out of his throat.

“You can,” she replied, sounding perplexed. “You are the—”

“I work with wood! If you’d seen the heap that was my truck, you’d know I’m no good with metal.”

She stared at him, and Paul couldn’t tell if it was the protest of the lack of understanding of what a truck was that caused it.

“I’m—” Donal swallowed as the two of them turned their gaze on him. “How about I go see to getting the staves that are in transit back into our hands while you two finish resolving... this?”

“There’s nothing to resolve,” Grant snapped. “I’m not a metalsmith.”

Paul glanced at the cheetah, who was watching the exchange with silent attention. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t assert the authority that radiated off him to stop the building argument.

“I saw you make the staff whole once more,” Wassa stated, and Donal hurried out while the attention wasn’t on him. “So you have the skill needed.”

Denton looked at the closing door, then placed his phone to his ear, speaking too quietly for Paul to make it out.

“Do you think I can just plug myself onto the internet and learn how to reforge a sword? This isn’t the Matrix!”

“I do not know what either are,” she replied. “But surely with all these new concepts, one such as you will find a way.”

“Look,” Grant said, sounding exasperated. Paul caught movement out of the corner of his eye and stood, heading for the back of the house. “It’s not because there’s stuff now you don’t know about that it means just anything can be done now.”

He didn’t see the person he’d glimpse before they pulled back, but the door to the bedroom was now closed. It made sense he’d take refuge there.

He knocked gently. “Thomas, it’s Paul.”

A second later, the door cracked open enough for the rat to poke his head out, look left and right, then pull the golden tiger in and shut the door behind them.

“This is bad,” Thomas muttered, pacing the length of the room. “We need to leave; right now.” He reached for Paul, who stepped back.

“How about you start by sitting down before you start hyperventilating?” Paul followed his own advice, sitting on the bed, then patted the space next to him. “Things aren’t *that* bad, are they?”

“Do you have any idea who that is?” Thomas demanded without slowing. “That’s Denton Brislow.”

“I know he’s the reason you don’t come to Denver anymore than you have to, but—”

“Do you have any idea what Raphael’s going to do when he finds out we’re in the same house? Fuck, that we were in the same room?”

“That’s...” Paul had to think back. It had been a few years since he’d heard that name. “It’s the Lewiston elder who imprisoned you and had Victor raped.”

“And tried to kidnap me over and over.”

Paul grabbed Thomas's arm and pulled him onto his lap. "When's the last time he tried? You're always on the move with Grant now, and you haven't mentioned him in a while." Thomas shrugged and leaned against the tiger's chest. "I don't think he's going to be able to do anything to you here, with everyone around. And I get the sense that Mister Brislow's pretty important in this city, and well connected."

"He's Raphael's arch nemesis!" the exclamation was followed by the rat resting his head against Paul's shoulder.

"Doesn't that mean here's the best place to be? Mister Brislow will make sure Raphael doesn't do anything."

"I doubt he can stop that rat from nuking Denver." Thomas ran a finger over Paul's chest.

"Why would Raphael go to that extreme?" Paul placed an arm around his best friend.

"Because he's insane," Thomas stated. "You should have heard him rant while he... When I was his prisoner. If he wasn't talking about how he was going to use me to assert his dominance over the Society, he was screaming about how Brislow was the reason for all the things that went wrong in his life. As for as he's concerned, some tiger murdering most of his family was caused by Brislow. As was him getting kicked out of the city by the Cormorans, and being shunned for a few years by everyone." He nuzzled Paul's shoulder. "As far as he's concerned, Brislow's the Society equivalent of the Anti-Christ."

"Okay." Paul chuckled as Thomas slipped a hand through the now unbuttoned shirt. "That qualifies as the most extreme case of hate I've ever heard of, but how does that—"

"He thinks I'm the Holy Grail." Thomas turned his head to look Paul in the eyes. "What do you think he'll do when he finds out the Anti-Christ got his hands on the Holy Grail?"

Paul swallowed.

At the idea, he told himself, and not at how Thomas lightly raked his fingers through his fur. "Can I ask you a question?" At least his best friend wasn't freaking out anymore, but maybe now wasn't the best time to get intimate. "Is the Holy Grail real?"

"Why?" Thomas grinned. "You want to drink from him?"

"It's a per—" Paul rolled his eyes as he realized what Thomas meant. Of course, for Society men, there was no such thing as a bad time for sex. He closed his mouth on the reflexive protest. And why shouldn't they? Grant and Wassa were busy and Donal was out. Who was going to come bothering them?

He smiled back and reached for the tail strap.

The knock stopped him.

"Mister Hertz," the mans said from the other side of the door. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't teleport away. Despite your justified fears, Raphael has no way of knowing you are here."

Paul looked at Thomas to gauge what he wanted, but his friend leaned in and kissed him.

"Also," Denton added, "Mister Heeran. I'm only going to say this nicely once. Stop influencing him."

"What?" Paul turned his head to look at the door. The rat went from the broken kiss to nibble on the tiger's neck. "What are you—Thomas, stop."

The cheetah entered and slammed the door in the bear's face. He crossed his arm, studying Paul.

"Thomas." Paul pushed the rat away. "Stop it. Now's definitely not the time."

"Come on," The rat replied with a goofy grin. "We haven't fucked in—" with a yelp, he jumped behind Paul and looked over his shoulder at the cheetah.

"At least you didn't teleport away this time," Denton sighed. "Now, Mister Heeran, You are—"

"I'm not doing anything."

"I know you believe you aren't, but I also know what I'm feeling. You are influencing him, and I need you to stop."

"How can you know I'm doing anything?" Paul asked, trying to elbow Thomas back as the rat now had his muzzle buried in his neck fur and was breathing in deeply. "Isn't one of the things about factions that you can only affect those in the same one as you?"

The cheetah searched Paul's face. "You're confusing followers with the gods. But even if that was the case, I'd still be able to sense your ability, since it's from Him."

The rat nibbled through the fur.

"Thomas, come on, now's not the time." He looked at Denton. "I'm not Society. The last time I was in an orgy with enough Society men to initiate me was a few years ago. It had to be two weeks since the last time I had sex, so how could I do any of His magic? Fuck, if not for how a staff shocked me, we wouldn't even know I'm from one of the factions. And before you bring them up, there aren't any tigers among the Survivors, so I can't be one of them."

“There are the Missionaries.”

“The who?” Paul shivered as Thomas moved the nibbling to the left. He really wished his best friend would stop it. This was making it difficult to focus on the threatening cheetah.

“You’d know if one of them had initiated you. They’re big about explaining what your duties to Him will be before you accept.”

“Then I can’t do them. I mean, I can’t be one of them, so not you. I’m not one of you.” He elbowed Thomas harder than he’d like.

“What’s that for?” Thomas replied, and Paul pointed to the cheetah. When the rat moved behind him again, Paul pulled him to his side.

Denton watched them as Paul kept Thomas from pulling away. “How about I show you what it’s like for your friend right now?”

Paul swallowed and opened his mouth to protest, but the cheetah frowned. When Denton frowned further, Paul felt vindicated. Whatever was going on with Thomas, he wasn’t the one doing it.

“Aren’t you feeling—” The cheetah was stopped by the door bursting forward, and pushing him. Then the bear grabbed the cheetah and shoved him against the wall, kissing him hard. Paul stared as the bear undid Denton’s pants.

“That looks like it’s going to be fun,” Thomas whispered, leaning into Paul. “Be a shame not to join them.”

Paul bolted off the best as the rat groped him. He might not be the one doing it, but was going too far, even for his best friend.

The bear flew between them, forcing Thomas to sit back down, then stopped and floated.

“That is enough of that,” Denton said, panting. And Paul stared at his erection before looking away. “Definitely the same brand as your father.” The cheetah pulled up his pants. “But not the same flavor.”

“What’s going on?” Thomas asked, looking like staying on the bed was an effort.

“You know my father?” Paul asked. His mother never spoke of him. Paul didn’t even know if he was alive or not. When he’d asked, back when he was a kid, she’d dismissed him as someone not important in the grand scheme of things.

“No, but I know his family.” The cheetah fixed his gaze on Paul. “You, Mister Heeran, are an Orr.”