

## Chapter 16

"Are we there yet?" Paul asked after glancing at the dash.

"Really?" Donal replied, incredulous.

"We're down to a quarter..." the golden tiger searched for the right word, "of the reserve. I don't know how long that's going to last us."

"I thought you were making that lame joke."

Paul grinned. "If it's going to make you more comfortable, I can start."

"Please don't."

Paul looked ahead, trying to make out the road. It no longer snowed, but the clouds had vanished and the sun reflected off the pristine powder, blinding him, even while wearing the sunglasses Donal had found under his seat.

The storm hit in waves. Whiteouts conditions, followed with him having only hints of where the roads were based on how the wind thin the snow over the road enough the white was slightly gray because if the asphalt under it.

"Why are they stopping the storm?" Paul asked. "Wouldn't it make more sense for the Chamber to just keep pressing Grant and Thomas with it?"

"Then can't," Donal answered after a few seconds. "They don't have the kind of strength we do because they lack our connection to our staff. So they need breaks, and the normal weather can reassert itself in that time."

"But doesn't it mean that without being bound to one person, they can pass it on to someone while they rest?" He motioned to the blue skies. "This has been going on for half an hour now."

"Letting someone else use their staff opens the door to the other showing they can use it better. Grant says it's one of the Chamber's greatest weakness. Anyone assigned a staff becomes so paranoid about having it taken away they won't let anyone else touch it." Donal looked at the staff in his hand, an assembly of nails, pennies, a toy car, what might be part of a soda can, and more than Paul couldn't identify, and frowned. He pointed to the right. "Turn here."

There were no roads Paul could see, but he turned, trusting the squirrel's magic. The SUV drove over something, then down an incline and through thick snow without slowing. He did his best not to think about what would happen if he lost control and slid off whatever they were driving on.

Silence fell back within the cab. Paul had expected conversation to alleviate the monotony, but other than Donal giving the occasional direction, and Paul's recent question, all his attention had gone on keeping the SUV on its wheel, and Donal focused on his staff.

It seemed like any getting to know you talk would have to wait until this was over, at which point Paul would head back to San Francisco.

The driving was getting easier, so maybe now was the time?

"What do you know about factions?" He asked, and Paul was surprised that had come out, instead of a more personal question. Maybe he wasn't as ready to get to know the squirrel as he thought? Or maybe his situation weight on him more than he wanted to admit.

"Not a lot," Donal answered, not looking up. "I hear stories, but I know better than to believe them." He glanced at Paul. "I'm not sure how useful what I've heard will be in narrowing which one you're a part of."

Paul nodded, That made sense. Still, Donal was the only current source of information. "What if I end up being part of a faction that's opposed to the Society? Most of the guys I know are part of it. So are my best friend and his family."

The squirrel shrugged. "I don't know that that's a thing. From what Grant told me, factions mainly stick to their own. There's been attempts to get some cooperation going, but they've been on their own for so long they're having trouble making it happen. If there's going to be any animosity, it's going to be on a one-on-one level."

"What has it been like for you, becoming a practitioner?" Paul looked up at the graying sky. Looked like the wielder had rested long enough.

Donal smiled. "Knowing Thomas changed my life more than being a Practitioner. I expect that even if I wasn't magic, he'd have made sure I got off the street. The only change I can think of because of my staff is having to stay off the Chamber's radar. I thought I was going a decent job of it, but that hare showing up on my doorstep proves that wrong."

"What are you going to do about that?" Paul asked as snow began falling again.

"I don't know. Once we're done with this problem, I'll figure out how to go about hiding myself again." He closed his eyes. "Make a left."

Paul made the turn and slowed, as the thickening snow made seeing the trees harder.

"I think we're getting close."

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What was the saying? Paul wondered, as he exited the still SUV. Close only counted with horseshoes and hand grenades? It certainly didn't with a nearly out of fuel SUV. He tightened the hood of his jacket over his head as trudge around the front of the bone dry vehicle.

"We're close," Donal said, then started moving.

Paul grabbed his arm before he completely disappeared into the storm. Paul couldn't afford to get separated, because visibility was now null.

He lost track of time, holding on to the squirrel as they both pushed through the storm and barely seemed to move. He had nothing to indicate how long or how far they'd traveled. Even looking behind him didn't help, since the storm covered their trail as quickly as they made it.

They might as well not be moving at all, Paul thought, and then there was no storm anymore and tents with people walking about. Paul pulled the squirrel back before anyone noticed them, and they were in the storm again, and he could barely see anything. It was like a line marked where the storm stopped.

Which, with magic, wasn't out of the realm of possibilities.

Paul stepped close enough to make out details. Tents, Jeeps, SUVs, and something more military-looking. And people. A lot of people. He couldn't see anyone holding staves, but who else could they be? Peering further, Paul just made out what looked an opening on the side of a steep hill.

"We can't go through then." As much as Paul wanted to believe Donal's magic could hide them, the Chamber had magic too, and any talisman they had at the entrance to catch someone trying to sneak out would work just as well against someone sneaking in.

Instead of responding, the squirrel walked parallel to the storm line.

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Donal pulled Paul out of the storm and they stood a few steps from a crack in the rock, with snow on each side, melted where warm air exited from the break in the stone. It felt stifling to Paul after being frozen for so long.

Donal's head snapped in his direction as Paul unzipped the jacket, looked him over before undoing his own. The squirrel reached for his belt and stopped, shook himself, and turned toward the tunnel.

Paul wished they had talked during the drive, because he was getting to where he wanted to get laid. He wasn't the sex machine his Society friends were, but, because they were his friends, it was rare he went more than a day without. This was what, a week, a week and a half since Dietrich? Trevor would have been dessert the day Shila drafted him to help her get out of San Francisco.

This might be the longest time without sex for him since... Henry had kidnapped him to get to Thomas.

Donal started walking, and Paul followed. "We're a lot closer," the squirrel said, then walked into a wall.

"You okay?" Paul asked.

"They're in that direction." Donal tapped the wall.

"And you staff won't help us navigate the tunnels?"

"It's always been more of a compass than a map with a 'you are here' marker."

"Then we'll just have to navigate with that in mind."

Did this part of the tunnel complex connect to the entrance the Chamber was guarding? He wondered as they walked. Did they have people inside, also looking for Grant and Thomas? What if his friends found the

staff they were looking for before Paul reached them? Thomas would teleport him and Grant away, leaving Paul and Donal to face—he stopped thinking. There were too many ways this could go wrong.

They were going to find Thomas and Grant, then get the staff, and then go home. It's how it had to go, otherwise—

He walked right into the other search party. Six of them, stepping away, looking as surprised at seeing them as Paul felt. How had he not heard them? They had big boots with hard soles and... foam tied around the boot's ankles?

They had talisman to sneak around, Paul had Donal to not get noticed.

No wonder neither had heard the others.

Paul reacted first and punched the woman before him. She blocked and grabbed for the set of cuffs at her belt. He swung at her again, but she had an easier time avoiding it without his element of surprise. He stayed on the offensive when she tried to close one of the cuffs around his wrist. He didn't know what they did, but it wouldn't be good. He side stepped her, was at her back and planted his elbow there and she went down. Before he could take in his win, someone struck him. He stayed on his feet in spite of his spinning head, and when he turned to face his attacker, the gerbil whipped out a feathered wand and pointed it at Paul.

He leaped to the side and kept moving up until he had a hand against the ceiling. From there, he watched Donal pull a set of keys from pocket on the jacket of the doberman trying to grab him. The squirrel had a lot of layers under his coat and his opponent couldn't find and purchase.

Paul put his feet under—over—him and propelled himself at the dog, slamming a shoulder into him, then bouncing off into an uncontrolled spin. He crashed to the ground with gravity reaffirming itself. Before he pushed to his feet, something closed around his wrist. The leopard he'd first tangled with grinned as she pulled on the other cuff.

Paul rolled to his feet and punched her as she looked from him to the cuff in her hand, stunned.

A gunshot sounded, and Paul ducked. He ran for Donal, who was fighting with the doberman again, kicked the legs out from under him and grabbed the squirrel's arm, turning to run the way they'd come and found himself facing a grinning gorilla pointing a gun at that.

Then someone just dropped on the gorilla, the rat kicking and punching, before vanishing again.

Paul turned in time to watch a kangaroo throw something at a chinchilla and the dog found himself wrapped in layers upon layers of packing tape. Grant kicked him unconscious, while Thomas appeared behind a giraffe, kicked their legs out, then helped their head reach the hard ground faster.

The cavern fell silent, except for Paul and Donal's panting.

"What the fuck are you two doing here?" Grant demanded. He looked ready to add more, but Paul was suddenly busy with an armful of rat.

Thomas's tongue pushed into Paul's muzzle and they both moaned. The golden tiger's tongue played with the rat's, while his hand dropped and squeezed the ass. Thomas ground his crotch against Paul. They were both hard. And after more than a week, Paul was more than ready to fuck his best friend until—

"What," Grant demanded, pulling Thomas away, "do you think you're doing? This isn't the time to make out. We have the Chamber on our ass, the fucking staff to find, and now these two idiots to look after. I get you Society types can't keep it in your pants, but I really thought you understood the danger we're in, Thomas. If not, I'm more than happy to—"

"Shila Apotheosized," Donal said.

Grant stared at the squirrel. He opened his mouth, closed it. He tried again, and again. Pain crossed his face and was replaced by anger. And then the cursing started.