

Chapter 30

Paul closed the door to the conference room and cut himself off from everything going on in the building.

He'd been surprised Thomas had dropped him off at Steel Link; he hadn't known he'd taken the time to make a landing spot there. Considering the way he'd reacted on seeing the cheetah, Paul would have expected his best friend to oppose any idea that would result in him appearing in the middle of Denton's base operation.

Looming war had a way of changing outlooks.

Was this even a war? Paul didn't have the qualification to know. He looked at his phone. But it certainly felt horrible.

He dropped into the closest chair and rested his head in his hands. Thomas had done a few trips with prisoners before teleporting his friends here. They were more important, needed to be secured before the Chamber had a chance to... do something. Paul had been kept too busy at the lake to think. And that had been a good thing.

He wished he could stop thinking right now.

The woman with the lantern staff, as well as any who had been confirmed as wielding a staff, were in a cell within Steel Link right now. The first because she'd seemed in charge and would have information. He'd been told when Paul had asked to be taken out of there among the first group. The others because Grant wanted to question them. Three trips Paul couldn't be part of because those people had to be guarded by professionals.

Paul had felt like screaming then; he needed to be away from all that death. Joseph had kept him busy with gathering supplies, putting together everything that couldn't be left behind. This operation had been conducted illegally, so they couldn't leave evidence.

Now Paul wished he'd remained there, perpetually busy, unable to think. He could have returned with those prisoners who'd be flown to Denver once some sort of cover could be fabricated.

The expected fight between Steel Link and Royal Security over who got to hold the prisoners didn't manifest. Royal, Paul learned, wasn't designed to hold them. They also couldn't be turned over to the authorities, local or otherwise, as magical battles didn't fall under anyone's jurisdiction.

Why Steel Link had cells? Paul didn't know. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

But Still Link got the people, Royal Security would handle the cleanup. Which was why Paul had been kept busy until Thomas teleported him here.

Paul wanted to go back so he wouldn't have to do what he had to now.

He brought up the list of names. Men he'd been entrusted with. Twelve names. Six highlighted; those who had made it to Lake Ilopango before the Chamber showed up and Thomas couldn't bring anymore. Of those, four were in red instead of green. Those who hadn't made it back.

Eric Liebel, Franklin Cooke, Van Silva, and Morgan Andrews. He remembered Morgan as the Moose. Eric was the hyena. For the life of him, he couldn't remember the

other two, even if he'd seen them on the battlefield only hours before. What kind of man didn't remember the men under his command?

How was Paul supposed to let their loved ones know he had led them to their deaths and had no idea who they were?

"Buck up, Heeran," He whispered to himself. "You were in charge. It's your responsibility to tell their families."

He tapped Frank Cole's name and his information appeared. Polecat, he read, and vaguely remembered him moving under Paul on the bed, encouraging him, promising to take him out to dinner once this was all over so they could make up for having to fuck first and get to know each other second.

Paul wiped at his eyes. How the fuck had he managed to forget someone that kind?

The knock startled him, and his phone clattered on the table.

"Thomas's about to take Yahui to his family," Roland said, looking in. "If you want to talk with him, now's the time."

Paul stared at the rat, mouth open to... what? What was he supposed to say? To tell the surviving twin? He was so fucking not equipped for this.

Roland stepped in and closed the door. "I was going with them, but if you want me to stay and keep you company, I will."

"You go," Paul hurried to say. "Your folks are going to want to know you're okay. Did you call Niel?"

"Yeah. He's wavering between being pissed we didn't call him in, happy he missed the battle, and relieved we're all okay."

Paul fought the urge to look at his phone. Was he even okay?

"Did you call your mom?" Roland asked.

"She fainted when she found out I was an Orr because she thinks they're organized crime. Finding out I nearly died is going to give her a heart attack."

"You're welcome to come to Taiwan with us. My parents would love to see you again."

Paul shook his head. "I have to be here to represent my cousin's interests."

"They can manage without you for a while. Even if Thomas has to be recharged before taking you back, you'd be gone a couple of hours at most. He can have you back here the instant you're needed."

Paul shook his head and did not look at his phone. "It's best if I stay."

"If you're sure." Roland hesitated, then stepped outside, looking back in before closing the door. "Paul, don't stay cooped up in here. What we went through is rough, but it's not going to be made better by making yourself miserable alone."

"That's pretty wise."

The rat chuckled. "Just repeating what Niel tells me. He's had his run in with the Chamber too. I think he learned that lesson better than I did."

Paul did look at his phone, considering Roland's words. Did he have to make the calls now? He pocketed it and stood. "I'll make sure I'm among other people."

Roland squeezed his arm. "You'll be okay. We won and we're going to stop the Chamber."

But what about the cost they'd pay making that happen?

The further cost, since they'd already started paying.

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Motions and raised voices pulled him away from the attempt at being alone among other people he'd been engaging in and to the conference room where the kangaroo was moving a map on the wall screen as city names were called out by the people typing on the conference table. Grant zoom the map out enough Paul made out England, then zoomed back in to a city.

"I do not understand why you are spending time with this," Wassa said, gesticulating around the room. "What we must find is where they will hold the ritual."

"Which they're going to have shielded so damned hard, it's going to take on of their gods dropping by and pointing at it for us to find it using magic."

"We do not need their gods, Grant. We are strong enough to accomplish this."

"Wassa, that's what I'm making happen here," the kangaroo replied, sounding exasperated. "Finding one of the places where they've been warehousing the staves before they're moved will let us find where they're holding that stupid ritual."

She pulled him from the screen. "You do not understand how strong you are, Grant. We do not need these..." She closed her mouth as she motioned to the table and the people working there. "We can find them ourselves. We only have to build the proper talisman."

"Damn it Wassa." Grant wrenched his arm out of her hold and grabbed the hilt of Excalibur, which had gained a sheath since the last time Paul saw it, and was not secured to the kangaroo's hip. "This doesn't make me some long-lost king with the power to fix everything. I'm not King fucking Arthur. Magic isn't always the solution." The sword stuck as Grant pulled on it, but instead of adding to his exasperation, the pause made him take a breath, and his tone was conciliatory when he continued. "I get that all this seems beyond strange to you. And I wish I had the time to explain how it works, the wonders people have come up with since your time. But you said it yourself. We don't have it. Nowadays, information is power. It's how we're going to find where the Chamber is hiding their ritual place."

"Can't Donal help with that?" Paul offered.

"The squirrel is off," Wassa said dismissively.

"Donal said something about having a sense of where Shila's phone needed to go, and Denton assigned him a detail. They're somewhere looking for what I expect is a hacker."

"And where is Denton? I'd have expected him to be helping with this."

Grant rubbed his face. "Last I heard, he was dealing with the prisoners. Not sure if that means those in the cells or arranging for those still to be delivered here."

Paul's question to ask where that would place the cheetah was interrupted by his phone ringing. He stared at the number. Only the fact it was an international number kept him from dismissing it. Thomas was out of the country, and Paul couldn't remember what the code was for Taiwan.

"Hello?" he asked cautiously in the phone.

"Finally! someone's got his fucking phone on."

"Chima?" Paul asked. "Chima! You're alive. It's Chima!" he yelled over those in the room. "Where are you? What happened?"

"If Grant or anyone else's around, put me on fucking speaker. I am not telling this

again.”

Paul found a free slot on the conference table and inserted his phone, then sent the audio to the room’s speakers. “We’re listening,”

“I’m here,” Grant said. “So is Wassa.”

“The chamber took over the Diamond particle accelerator and did the kind of stuff to the building I’ve seen you do to your trucks, Grant. I figure they plugged in talismans and stuff, and that let them make the portal to the lake.”

“Chima, slow down,” the kangaroo looked at the information appearing before him. Paul saw the Diamond name. A muted video showed vehicles positioned to defend the building against anyone approaching. “How sure are you that it’s like my trucks?”

“How the fuck do I know?” the hyena replied. “Talismans aren’t my magic. It all looked connected in one way or another, like what you did with the stuff you put on your trucks.”

“Chima, are you safe?” Grant asked, his tone calm, even as his expression spoke in near panic.

“Yeah. Ran like a maniac once I disrupted the portal ritual. Made it to the Ogdens before I dropped. Only just woke up and tried everyone’s fucking phone until I got Paul’s that was turned on. What’s the fucking deal with all your phones being turned off?” he yelled.

“Mine got destroyed in the battle,” Grant said, his tone forcefully calm now. “Thomas and Roland are out of the country, deal with Yahui. Kuno’s was still unconscious from exhaustion an hour ago.”

“Oh.” The hyena was quiet. “I sort of thought things would end with me shutting down the portal.”

“No, Chima, things did not simply end then. You’re safe, that’s the important thing. Stay with the Ogden. I need to figure things out, but I think we’re going to be joining you.” He ended the call.

“You look perturbed, Grant,” Wassa stated.

The kangaroo nodded. “My trucks aren’t a series of talisman that I link together. When I’m done, the truck is one large talisman.” He looked at the news feed showing the large circular building in the middle of what looked to Paul like a running track. “If he’s right, the Chamber turned that entire building into the larger talisman I’ve ever heard of. Possible was ever created. And I can’t begin to imagine the concepts that a particle accelerators can bring into play. Fuck, one of them revealed the existence of the god particle.”

“A piece of the gods?” the seal asked, sounding only mildly curious.

“No.” Paul tried to remember the name of the particle. “It’s just what people called it because they thought it was one of the underlining particle. That’s not really going to help them... right?”

“Concepts, Paul.” Grant said. “Our magic works on the concepts items contain and what we can do with those.” He looked at Wassa. “You wanted to know where they were going to perform their ceremony?” He pointed to the news feed. “I can’t think of a better place to kill gods than the one whose purpose is to collect a particle named for the collective.”

The room fell silent.

Paul tried to wrap his mind around the idea the Chamber could use something's name as a tool, a weapon, to kill actual gods.

Denton stepped into the room and looked at them, his expression turning grim. "Grant, can you spare Mister Heeran, or is this where the world is about to end and we need to start running to keep that from happening?"

The kangaroo studied images, then waved the golden tiger away. "We have time. If I'm right, Chima's disruption of the portal will have disrupted the whole. They aren't about to blow up your gods." He fixed his gaze on the cheetah. "But I highly advise we start mobilizing. The Chamber aren't going to drag their feet making repairs." He motioned to the feeds. "Because they have to realize that just with that, we'd eventually work out what they're planning."

"Maxwell," Denton told a chinchilla at a computer. "I need an inventory of all our assets. If Tom calls, reassure him I'm sitting this one out." He motioned at Paul. "If you'll come with me. There's something I need your help to resolve."

Paul unsocketed his phone. "I should call Thomas and let him know Chima's okay."

"On it," the chinchilla called as Denton opened his mouth.

Paul followed the cheetah out of the conference room.

"Are you okay?" Denton asked.

"The world's about to end. So not really."

"It's not going to end."

Paul looked sideways at the cheetah. "How do you know?"

"Because if that was going to happen, He wouldn't settle for turning my dreams into his message board. He'd be right here, reminding me I'm his champion and that he expects me to do something about it." He looked up. "Which we already are. So how about you give me one night of actual sleep? You do remember that *I* need sleep, right?" He sighed. "This might get messy. World changing kind of mess, but as a collective, we're going to get through it."

"I wish I shared your confidence."

"Hey, I'm a champion, so you know I'm right." The cheetah's smile faltered. "Not to diminish your importance here, but fixing this isn't going to fall on your shoulders. This is why gods have champions, and people like those two... whatever they are." He massage the bridge of his muzzle. "You have more down-to-earth problems to handle." He opened the door before them.

Paul stepped into an observation room out of a police TV show. On the other side of a window was a bare room with a mattress on the floor and a naked doberman writhing, rubbing his ass against a crease on the mattress.

"What are you doing to him?" Paul asked, dismayed.

Denton shook his head. "That isn't us. He was found on the beach after you got here. Pantless and begging to be fucked." He looked at Paul expectantly.

"Okay?"

"I've seen this before, but I called Arnold to make sure. That is what someone on the receiving end of the full Orr influence looks like if he doesn't get fucked by the person who influenced him."

“Okay, then why aren’t you getting him in there to fix this?”

Denton turned to face him. “You did this, Paul.”

“No, I can’t,” Paul replied dismissively. “That’s not how mine works. You know that. You can feel it, right?”

“Evidently, it is. And yes, I can tap your ability. And now that it’s not muddled by what you were radiating before, I do know it very well.”

Paul shook his head. “I wasn’t interested in anyone while there, certainly someone like him. Fuck, you think I’d be able to get horny in the middle of what we were going through?”

Only he remembered getting horny. He’d had to do it to help Raoul. There had been an interruption. He’d gotten pissed at someone, had wanted to lash out at the dog with a gun.

A doberman.

Paul looked at the man in agony on the other side of the glass and staggered back.

He couldn’t have done this.

“Paul?” Denton reached for him, but the golden tiger jerked away.

“That’s what they do?” he swallowed the bile. “*That’s* the power they’re all so fucking proud of?”

They weren’t just entitled assholes who believed they were entitled to sex. If they wanted a guy, they just took away his will to resist.

They were fucking rapists.

And Paul was one of them

He looked again at the man on the other side of the window.

Paul ran out of the room because he had outrun the bile rising at what he’d done to that man.