

Chapter 43

Paul woke up.

That wasn't a surprise in and of itself, but he was alone on a cot, and inside a standing tent. He was confident he'd been standing in a tent with a lot of people, and no cots when the shockwave knocked him out, and if it had managed that, he should have woken with everything ripped out of the ground for miles around.

"Welcome back," a woman said and Paul startled into sitting. The brown bear had green woven through her fur.

"Thomas?" he'd been reaching for his best friend in the process of collapsing when things had... happened.

"The teleporter is being seen to by the people from his faction. We decided that those not in a position to participate shouldn't be in the way of those having sex."

"We?" Paul tested his limbs for pains and aches and felt none.

"Nature is our strength," the bear said. "And we are in the middle of a forest. We woke from the explosion first. Others from your faction woke soon after us."

"So much for Arnold's gift," he muttered, then shook his head at her inquisitiveness. Well, if he was awake, and Thomas was being seen to, there were things to be done. "What's the damage like?"

"Surprisingly contained; all things considered."

Oh, that didn't bode well.

He stood, then had to wait for the vertigo to pass before heading outside.

The camp looked normal enough. The same as it had the last time Paul had seen it. Even the trees were still standing, with the sunlight shimmering through the canopy swaying in the breeze. He found a pair of binoculars and looked at the mansion.

Or rather, where the mansion had stood. There was little left of it. A partial wall here, a beam jutting out of the ground there. Grant *had* said 'shouldn't', not 'wouldn't' when taking about the potential damage.

Looking closer, he made out bodies littering the property. It was a good thing Grant wasn't here to see that his last act hadn't been as free of death as he had—

Paul adjusted the focus. He'd almost convinced himself it had been his imagination when the body stirred again. Then another, and another. How had anyone that close to the explosion which had ripped the mansion about survived it? Maybe as part of mounting the attack, everyone of the Chamber had been equipped with magical protection?

"Oh, fuck." The Chamber was still alive. "I need people!" He ran. "I need everyone we have and whatever we can use to restrain the Chamber before they decide to make our lives miserable again!"

Before he made it out of the camp, he had people running at his side, a particularly angry buffalo whose expression promised they'd be talking once this was dealt with.

The Chamber proved suspiciously easy to secure. Even the most vehement in fighting against them was using their fists, and it was the rare Chamber who had combat

training. There were no staves in sight, and anything that might have been a talisman looked to have been taken apart. As if whatever held them together had been removed and the components allowed to fall freely.

The one person Paul hadn't expected to come across was the one casualty. God Wolf rested on the ground with a peaceful expression on his face. Paul could imagine that he'd gotten some form of a warning of what was about to happen, and he had stretched out, readied himself for it, thankful it was over.

He could imagine it, if it had been anyone other than God Wolf.

Maybe he had sensed what was coming, this was magic after all, but God Wolf had been too full of himself, of his own power to lie down and wait for the end to come.

Looking at the body, Paul realized something, and he looked toward the mansion. If God Wolf hadn't been destroyed the way Grant said all staved would be. That meant Grant's body was still in there. He ran for the camp.

He wasn't leaving it there. The least they owed the kangaroo after he saved the world was to make sure he received the proper burial rites. Whatever those were for Practitioners.

Donal might know what those were

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"I have the stairs!" Someone yelled as Paul tried to move a fallen wall out of his way. Then, with the feeling of a hand on his shoulder, he and Thomas were at the top of the stairs, a badger cursing in French while Paul looked down at the wreckage that were the stairs.

"I don't think you—" the yeller said, but the rest was left behind as he was at the bottom of the stairs.

"No one but us is seeing to him," Thomas muttered.

Paul took the military flashlight out and shone it around. "He might be more worried we'll be buried under here." The walls were standing, and the ceiling didn't look like he would fall down immediately.

"Come on." Thomas walked to the archway, where he came to an abrupt stop. "Okay, I wasn't expecting that," he said as Paul joined him.

And neither had Paul.

The room was... intact. The pyre in the center of the room still had the wooden tendrils extending to the walls, where, as far as he could see, every staff still hung. It was as if nothing had—

"Don't," Paul warned Thomas, who'd appeared on the other side of the room and touched a flag pole.

Thomas didn't show a reaction to touching it. "It worked," he called, sounding saddened.

They reached the pyre at the same time. On it, Excalibur and Joan of Arc's swords were shattered. The only two broken staves.

"He was lying on it when we left, right?" Paul asked.

"Maybe he got bored while giving us the time to evacuate and walked around."

"And hide where?" Paul looked around the pyre. "And he would have to touch the swords to activate the pyre, right? I mean, they are broken; that means he was touching them."

"I think so." Thomas rejoined Paul. "I've only ever seen him break staved by actually

breaking them. This was a talisman, so it might have worked differently. His body should be here,” he whispered.

Paul placed an arm around his best friend’s shoulders. “Maybe for his sacrifice he had to...”

“Who knows.” Thomas leaned into him. “Maybe the universe took him back.” They headed for the archway. “I guess he doesn’t need last rites.”

“We can still do something to remember him by.”

“I’m going to miss that asshole.” Thomas said with a sigh.

Paul pulled the rat against him tighter for comfort, the only thing he knew to give in this situation.

They froze as a fearful yell echoed through the chamber, then something thudded on the ground. As a pained groan came, the two of them turned.

The kangaroo rolled on his back. “Really?” he yelled at the ceiling. “You fucking reveal yourself to me, and just drop me back down?”

Paul stared, trying to understand what he was seeing.

“You can do anything you fucking want, but you couldn’t deposit me on the ground gently, could you?”

Paul started, trying to understand what he was seeing.

Grant pushed himself to his feet with a groan and looked up again. “Fuck! I like it better when I thought it was the universe behind my magic!” he spread his arms wide. “The universe doesn’t owe me a fucking soft landing!”

Thomas vanished from next to Paul and wrapped his arms around the kangaroo. Paul’s arm dropped and the motion finally kicked his brain into gear. He rushed to join them as Grant hugged Thomas back.

“Sorry for the scare, kiddo,” Grant said. “To be fair, I was expecting this to be the end for me.”

“We’re just glad you’re alive.” Paul hugged them both. “But how?”

“Gods,” Grant said as he extricated himself. “Well, one of them. Turns out I’m a follower like the rest of you. It just happens I follow a god that’s so hands off he let us make up whatever story we wanted about him. The freedom to express our creativity, my ass.” He looked at the ceiling. “They were trying to kill you too, you know!”

Paul pulled Thomas away, so the kangaroo had breathing room. “Okay, but coming back to life is—” he stumbled back as he no longer held the rat, who was back, wrapped around the kangaroo. Paul rolled his eyes. “I’ve never heard of anyone coming back to life, even with the gods involved.”

“Well, I guess it’s not often a god’s high on the magic of hundreds of strong magical artifact.” Grant tried to peel the rat off him. “Thomas, I’m glad I’ll be there for your son’s birth, but’s only happening if you don’t crush the life out of me first.”

“Sorry,” the rat said, without letting go.

“Okay. So he brought you back to life as a reward for saving the word?” Paul asked, trying to make sense of it.

“I wish,” Grant replied with a roll of the eyes. “No, me saving the world was just the proof the asshole needed to know I was the one follower capable of carrying out his instruction to whip the remaining followers into shape while protecting them from the

fallout of this whole mess they caused.” The kangaroo shrugged as Paul stared. “Standard marching orders for any champion, I suspect.”

“Then shouldn’t you speak about him more respectfully?” Thomas asked.

“If he wanted respect, he has a following full of dead people who will love nothing more than since his praises.” He patted Thomas on the back. “Kid, I know you want to keep me to yourself, but we need to get back to camp. I have my marching order as champion to fulfill before I can take time for myself.” He smiled at Paul. “Be normal for a while.”

“Do champions get to do that?” Paul asked as he placed a hand on Thomas’s shoulder.

“Oh, he fucking better let me.”

Then they weren’t in the mansion anymore.

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The nearly two hundred Chamber, well, people—Grant had explained that without staves, the Chamber no longer existed, neither did the Practitioners—were assembled under guards

Paul nervously glanced at Donal and Wuhan. The squirrel looked as nervous as the golden tiger felt, while the red panda looked introspective. Grant had taken them aside to explain what was about to happen; which put them ahead of Paul. All he had to go by was what he could infer from the thing Grant had said in the basement.

Also, unlike him, they actually belonged here.

Grant has insisted he come when the kangaroo had adamantly refused to let any of the more powerful men come any closer than the line he’s made in the ground thirty feet back. This felt like Grant was using Paul to snug the others, and Thomas’s explanation that Grant had never been a fan of authority supported that. If anything, meeting his god seemed to have lowered the kangaroo’s patience when it came to people ordering him about.

With them, as they stood before the assembled prisoners, was Denton. The cheetah had accompanied them without asking, and Grant hadn’t commented on it.

“Alright,” Grant said to the men and women. “I’m hoping you’ve noticed things have changed, because I’m in no mood to go over the detail. This little war of yours is over. Not only that, but there are no more Chamber. Or Practitioners!” he yelled over the protests, and they fell silent.

“There never was,” he continued. “We just got too obsessed with staves and what they represented. And we got that wrong too, but that’s not entirely on us.” The kangaroo looked at the sky. “If a certain someone had just stepped in and explained things, a lot of this could have been avoided.”

“What are you insinuating?” a woman asked.

“I am telling you that we have a god, always did. He’s just been criminally hands off. But that doesn’t change that we are his children. We are the Children of Merlin.”

Someone in the back snickered. “You expect me to believe that Merlin, from King Arthur, was a god?”

“That Merlin wasn’t even part of the story,” Grant replied in exasperation. “Of that *fable*. He was added at some point. And it’s just a name. What’s important is that he’s been told in no uncertain terms that what you almost did, twice, isn’t acceptable. Hence, the downgrading.”

“If he was god, like you claim,” someone yelled. “He’d have stood up to anyone

trying to tell him what to do.” Others joined in voicing their agreement.

Grant looked at the cheetah as if they weren’t yelling insult his way. “Is this because I’ve been blessed with a flock of creatives? That it’s how they can come up with such idiotic things?”

“Get used to it,” Denton replied. “They never listen to us.”

The kangaroo sighed before looking at his still screaming congregation. “Okay!” He yelled and continues. “I guess I’m going to have to spell it out to you! Merlin let you bunch nearly killed every other god not once, but twice. The *other gods* are pissed about it. Their mandate is this. We stay in line, or they are wiping us out to the last. And if you think that’s an empty threat, look at the people behind me, look at their expression, and remember, these are but a tiny fraction of all the factions out there. You all love to use your imagination, so imagine what’s going to happen if their gods order them to exterminate us.”

“They wouldn’t dare!” someone yelled.

“They don’t have the right!” added another, and again, others joined in.

The cheetah shrugged at the disbelieving look Grant gave him.

“You fucking tried to murder all of them! Don’t fucking tell me what they can and can’t do in response to that unless you start by admitting what you did is wrong! Now,” the kangaroo tried to regain his composure. “I’m here to make sure you lot actually start behaving like—”

“Who put you in charge!” someone yelled.

“You have got to be kidding me,” grant nearly yelled back. “Who do you fucking think? Our god put me in charge.”

The crowd reacted to someone making his way through them. “You expect me to believe a god would put someone line you in charge of anything?” A vole in a rumpled black suit Paul had seen not too long ago stepped out from the crowd.

“Kingsley,” Grant greeted him happily. “Believe it or not, I’m glad you’re alive.”

The vole snorted, continuing to approach. “Right, because that tornado was meant to keep me alive.”

The kangaroo smiled and motioned for the guards to let him. “You, more than anyone, know that precision’s never been my thing. But here’s the deal. No more staves. No more direct line into him. We’re like the other factions now. Talismans are the only way we do magic from now on.”

Kingsley spat at Grant’s feet. “Fuck you.”

“That how things are, Kingsley. It’s how our god dictates we work from this point forward. We abused what we had before.”

“You think I’m going to have anything to do with you, or anything that thinks you deserve to be anything more than a stepping stone for those who deserve power?”

“That sounds a lot like you don’t want to be a Child of Merlin,” Grant said, smiling.

“I,” Kingsley snapped, “am Chamber! I will take what is rightfully mine!”

Cheers and chants of Kingsley’s name rose, and Grant’s smile broadened as the vole stood taller.

“Thank you for giving me the satisfaction.” He had a hand on the vole’s forehead before Kingsley could react, then he stood frozen. “Remember that you were given the choice to stay.”

The defiance melted off the vole's face, replaced by confusion, then fear. Grant pushed him back, and he staggered.

"What did you do?" Kingsly demanded. "What did..you.." Realization seemed to sink in.

"Did you think Merlin would let you keep his magic if you weren't going to follow him?" he faced the crowd, stunned into silence. "That is the choice you are making today. Any who refuse to live by the rules of the Children of Merlin can leave. Our god will not force his will on you, but he doesn't give freebies either. You want his magic? Then you live by his rules, like the other factions and their gods."

"You can't just let them go!" someone behind them yelled. "They have to pay for their crimes."

Grant turned and faced the men and few women in the other crowd. "Those who leave the Children of Merlin," Grant hooked a thumb toward the vole, now on his knees, "are yours to do with as you will. Kill them, imprison them, or recruit them into your own flock if you god will let you. I don't care."

He straightened, and somehow, Paul thought there was more of Grant there. "Those who stay are under mine, and my god's jurisdiction. With His control comes His protection. Touch them at your peril."

"You aren't making friends," Denton whispered as that crowd started protesting.

"Do we ever?" Grant asked, and just like that, whatever Paul thought he's felt a second before was gone and this was just plain, not quite ordinary Grant.

The shrug the cheetah gave him was filled with promises, which could be good and bad.

"Well, in for a penny..." he took a breath. "The war is over! Amnesty for the losing side, as long as they agree to the terms of surrender, is completely—"

"They tried to kill my god!" someone shouted.

"And those are the terms your gods agreed to," hollered Grant. "Take it up with them." That shut them up for a second, then they were shouting about how Grant didn't speak for their god.

The kangaroo sighed. "Any reason they don't just all pick their champion so we can bypass the ambiguity of their will?" he asked Denton.

"If you can get yours to answer that question, tell me the answer," the cheetah replied mirthfully.

Grant shook his head and picked up the folding chair that has been lying at his feet. "Please keep them off my back until I know how many sheep my flock contains." He unfolded the chair and sat down facing the former Chamber, who were shuffling, both literally and metaphorically, between defiance and uncertainty.

Paul watch as Grant let out the sigh of someone watching all his free time vanish into thin air.