

The ranch-style house was large, but with minimal security. Cameras so the occupants knew who was approaching, but no gate, no wall except for the fence keeping the quad bovines and equines from running off.

“You going to be with Royal Security, Mister Cartwright?” Elias asked. He just couldn’t stop teasing me about it. I’d explained why I wasn’t an Orr as part of the security company. Being identified as the owner’s son wouldn’t be helpful, but he just found it hilarious that me, a mighty Orr, had an alias.

“No.” I pressed the buzzer and immediately the door opened and a rhino that would make uncle Dietrich hire him on the spot and give his head trainer the boner to end all boners looked us over. “Wyatt Orr, I’m here to speak with your boss.”

“Mister Abraham isn’t accepting visitors without an appointment,” the rhino replied and made to close the door. I put my hand on it and it stopped. The man didn’t show the effort he put in pushing on it, but I could feel him trying.

I smiled. “Unless your boss wants to have to explain to the FBI why he helped a child molester and killer, he’s going to explain it to me. And if I don’t like his answer, he’s not going to have to worry about explaining anything to anyone. Ever.”

Elias raised an eyebrow, and the rhino reached for the gun at his hip. Texans and their guns.

“Let them in, Walter,” a reedy voice came from the man’s radio clipped on his other side. Radio? In this day and age?

The rhino wasn’t happy, but he escorted us to a bedroom and I heard the sounds of machines before I saw them. Joseph Abraham lay on a bed surrounded by them. He looked nothing like the pictures on the bio I’d found. There, he was a strong and proud man. Here, he was frail, still defiant, but without strength.

“You have some explaining to do,” I told him. Of course, I care that he’s dying. I can’t help that part of myself, but the man provided a child molester housing to select his target from and to perform his twisted rituals. I won’t let his old age influence me.

He raised an eyebrow. “Do I? I don’t think you’re the police.”

I stepped closer and the rhino interposed himself.

“It’s alright, Walter.” The rhino glowered but moved away.

“What kind of monster are you?” I demanded.

He laughed weakly. “Oh, that’s rich, coming from you, Mister Wyatt Orr, considering the things your family has done. You should clean your own house before you complain about how messy someone else’s is.”

“So you know who I am. Good. Then you know if you don’t answer to my satisfaction, there’s nothing that guy can do to keep me from snapping your neck.”

“Oh joy,” the man said. “Threatening my life. Look around. It’s already under threat.”

“These tell me you aren’t ready to give up yet,” I commented. “So you don’t want me to kill you. And to be clear, my house is clean. We don’t go around helping child killers.”

“Of course you don’t,” the buffalo said derisively and looked at Elias. “I don’t recognize you. Are you a Chouteau?”

I snorted. “You think I’d work with one of those assholes?”

“You know bout the Chouteau?” Elias asked. “The Society?”

“And the Thinkers, the Sisters, the Green man, and the others. I may be old, but I’m not stupid. When the world changes around me, I learn everything I can about it.”

“I’m Elias Johns. I’m helping Wyatt investigate the disappearance of five boys eight years ago.”

“He owns you, you mean.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” the otter replied.

The old man rolled his eyes. “The Orrs own people. They don’t have friends, they don’t seek help. They demand it and if you don’t give it, they make you pay.”

I didn't contradict him, and the man seemed surprised.

"Your information isn't entirely accurate," Elias said, "but the status of my relationship with Wyatt isn't relevant. You provided housing to a murderer. I'm curious how you justify your actions."

"You think I knew what he was planning?"

"I didn't read anything about you coming forward with information," Elias said.

The man frowned at him. "I didn't think the police worked with people like him."

"Didn't you say he owns me? Wouldn't he not give me the choice?" Elias was enjoying himself. He didn't get to play around with truths during a normal investigation. But as nice as it was watching him, that wasn't why we were here.

"What did he tell you he was doing?" I demanded.

The buffalo turned his gaze to me. "What is the information worth to you?"

"You didn't just go there," Elias said.

"You don't understand the situation," I told the man. "I'm not paying for the information. The absolute best result you can expect is me to leave here satisfied you were used and weren't colluding with Wanna Be."

The man beamed. "I have something you want. So I have the power here."

I looked at the closest machine. The controls for the breathing assist that was keeping the man alive. The on/off switch was nicely marked. I flicked it off, then held the rhino by the neck as he came to turn it back on.

"In your research on my family, did you read up on one of my fathers? Arthur. I didn't get to meet him; he was murdered outside a child's hospital. So I read up on him." The man's eyes grew wide. He was already gasping for breath. "I have an affinity to learn stuff and as part of learning about my dead father, I read a good number of medical books. I'm no doctor myself, but I know enough to know which of these machines can hurt you the most if I turn it off. This one will kill you if I let it go on long enough." I flicked it back on and leaned in to look into the man's eyes. "So don't think you have anything resembling power here. I'm an Orr, I can live without getting what I want out of this meeting. You can't."

The man's fear was muted by weakness and pain. He might even think I couldn't see it. "You don't scare me."

I flicked the machine off again.

"Then you don't know my family as well as you think you do."

"Wyatt," Elias said. "You can't do this."

The smile I gave him wasn't pleasant. "I can, and I am. You knew what it might come to when you agreed to help."

"He's an old man. I have no problem with you doing anything you want to Wanna Be, but he's just someone who was used."

I flicked the machine back on and Elias thought he got through to me. The old man couldn't speak if he couldn't breathe.

"Rich folks aren't used, Elias, they use people."

The old man let out a weak laugh. "And here you are, using him."

"I am." He knew it. He might not understand how far I'd go, and if it got to be too much, he'd leave. I looked down at the buffalo. "You see, the big difference between you and my family is that we have no problem admitting to the kind of assholes we are. We're not worried about appearing nice. So when we are, we mean it. When we aren't. We're just being ourselves." I reached for the machine's switch. "I don't feel like being nice right now."

"Wait," the man said tone desperate.

I smiled. "Good. We finally understand each other." I let go of the rhino and he immediately swung at me. I had him on the floor and was standing before the rhino understood he was unconscious from his head impacting the hardwood. "So, Wanna Be?"

The old man looked like he'd try for a deal again, but as I reached for the switch, he said. "He told me his name was Steven Mullen. He's a jaguar. I didn't try to find out if it was his real name. He promised me a cure for this." He motioned to himself, the machine around them. "I'm

dying, have been for a long time.”

“And you believed him?” Elias asked.

“You wouldn’t?” the buffalo replied. “Have you looked around? Magic is real. Why wouldn’t I believe him?”

“There are others who offer proven methods.” He nodded to me.

“And become his family’s slave? I didn’t make it to where I am by bending over for other people.”

“No, you inherited your wealth,” I said. “He said he’d keep you from dying. I’m guessing you found out he lied to you when he just up and vanished after killing the boys.”

“He didn’t lie,” the buffalo said. “He’s still perfecting the process. That’s what he told me when he left. The police were starting to pay too much attention, and there’s only so much I can do to get them to look elsewhere.”

“He’s trying to perfect what, immorality?” Elias asked in disbelief.

I thought over the symbols, the ones in the building and the ones at the farmhouse. Eight years of evolution. It gave me an idea of where Wanna Be was heading with them, and they still made little sense. They weren’t aiming toward any symbols I recognized.

Of course, I’m not an expert on magic. But I do know one.

I checked the time, did the conversion. It was very early in Kenya. If I had the luxury, I’d call him directly. Instead, I call the palace.

“Odinga Residence,” an official sounding woman answered in Swahili.

“This is Wyatt Orr, of the San Francisco Orrs,” I answered in the same language. “Is the King available?”

“It is late here, Mister Orr.” She was still speaking Swahili, which told me she wasn’t pleased.

“I know, and I offer my sincerest apologies. If I was in a position to wait, I would have.”

“I will see if he is willing to speak with you.” Singing replaced her. I was on hold.

“Who are you calling?” Elias asked. The buffalo was watching me intently. Did he understand Swahili?

“Fred Odinga. If anyone can tell me if those symbols mean anything, it’s going to be him.”

“Wouldn’t the Thinkers know too?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t fucked any of the Thinkers I know.”

“You’ve had sex with the Kenyan king?”

I rolled my eyes. “I had sex with him before he was crowned. It’s only been ten years.”

“Wyatt?” the lion came over the phone. “Man, it’s been a while; how are you doing?” I made out moans and grunts, but they grew faint and realized he spoke English.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

“Nah, just resolving complaints between people. Frank can deal with them for a while. How can I help?”

“Can you look at some pictures for me and give me your professional opinion?”

“Send them.” I did, and a minute later, he spoke again. “What am I looking at?”

“I’m investigating a serial killer and he left those symbols behind. The ones in blood were under a month ago, the scratching was eight years.”

“I never took you for someone caring about stuff like this.”

“Obsidian Black put me on the trail and they wouldn’t have done that without a good reason.”

“Who?”

“Right, you wouldn’t know about them. They’re the hacker who took over for Emerald.”

“Wasn’t she one of Merlin’s people?”

“Yeah. No one’s sure who Black is, or even if they’re with Merlin or another faction. All I know is that they don’t bug me without reason. I know those aren’t sigils, but can they be symbols from another faction?”

“I don’t recognize them from anything I read, except for one.” I received a file. A zoomed section from the bloody wall at the farmhouse. “That looks a lot like a symbol I saw in a book years

ago. But it shouldn't be possible."

"Okay, the only times I've known you not to outright say something, it was really bad news."

"Do you remember the stories about Sahataan?"

"Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me."

"Look, it could be a coincidence. Sahataan is no more, we know that for sure."

"But someone took his place." Someone related to me on top of that.

"Yes, but Damian has never been seen on the earthly plane. He killed all of Sahataan's followers in his coup, which left him with no one to power him."

"But that doesn't mean he died. Our god starved for a long time, the way gods count time, before the Society found him. So it's possible I'm dealing with the fucking god of sacrifice?"

Fred didn't say anything, which made Elias's stare hard to ignore. He took out his phone, and I grabbed it out of his hand with a shake of the head. The glare he gave me was not happy.

Fred let out a breath. "Okay, dealing with gods screws up calculations, but it's one symbol among a lot that are nonsense. It's possible it's just luck. Or maybe your killer came across something online. A lot of junk appeared online after Diamond, and among all of it, there's a few gems. It's nearly impossible to prevent truth from finding its way now that people are actively searching for it. I miss the days when no one believed in magic."

"So your expert opinion," I said, fixing Elias with my gaze, "is that this isn't a sign Damian is involved."

"That's correct."

I raised an eyebrow and the otter nodded. I handed him back his phone. "Looking at what's there, do you think the guy's getting close to accomplishing what he set out to?"

"Set out to?" Fred is quiet. "No, that's basically meaningless... oh, you're with someone and you don't want him to realize..." He chuckled. "Man, I miss those days. But no, this is junk. The one thing you need to consider, and this is an outside chance on the same level as your uncle appearing next to you for a fuck. Is that if he's magical, his perseverance could empower what he's doing. Magic isn't science. The Hertz kid proved that it's possible to change what we think are laws of magic."

I glanced next to me before I could stop myself and shuddered at the idea Damian might be there. He might be related to me, but no one in my family thinks of him as such. Even before he made himself a god, my fathers had disowned him for taking over the gray church and going to war against us.

"Okay, I'll keep this in mind. Thanks, Fred. If you ever make it stateside, let me know, I'll make space in my bed for you and your brother."

"Yeah, if I can ever escape my palatial life, I will visit you." The next part was muffled by his hand. "You're the one insisting I need to stay here for my safety. I had no say in it, so don't be surprised if I look for a way out anytime you aren't fucking me." He was back. "Anyway, Frank's being an asshole again. I gotta go and plug it." He disconnected.

The buffalo couldn't hide his eagerness.

"You said he left," I said, putting my phone away, "did he say where he was going?"

"How close is he to succeeding?"

"That isn't how this works," I told him, smiling. "You want something, you have to pay for it. Where did he go?"

"He said there was something in Denver that would help him."

Denver. Why, oh why, wasn't I surprised? I nodded and leaned to his ear. "The guy conned you. He was never doing anything magical. He's just a sick bastard, and you're one too, for thinking anything is worth the life of children."

I reached for the switch as I watched the despair fill his face, then stopped. The news was destroying him. If I killed him, I was ending his suffering. The guy didn't deserve that mercy. I left him there.

"Denver," Elias said, once we were outside.

I nod. I had my reason to visit Eddy, but what were the odds I'd be able to avoid his father?

"I can go there with you."

I shook my head. "I doubt Bodenman will let you. That's Brislow territory."

"I thought the Cormorans were the official head of Colorado and the area."

"They are, but whoever runs security is who you have to worry about. In Colorado, that's the Brislow family. You know Bodenman is in their elder's bed, right?"

"Yeah, they go way back. From before there was a Brislow family is my understanding."

"He and my family have a history. We also have one with the Brislow. My visit there won't be fun."

"You guys are going to have sex. That sounds fun to me, no matter how angry it is."

I smiled. "It's the rest of my time there that isn't going to be fun."

At least Eddy would make a lot of that bearable.

The building was a four-story concrete affair in a mixed industrial and office park. To the east, the Westminster financial district was visible, with its towers. To the west, the mountains rose in the distance over housing going up in value and size, as they moved away from Denver proper. We crossed a few commercial strips to get here and one nearly abandoned neighborhood.

Enough variety to keep even the most finicky office worker pleased, or decide to work from home.

There was no name on the building, but an online search tells me it was the Okana Medical Research center, and that they were focusing on immune degenerative diseases research. There was a time when that meant they looked to cure it. Now, if the right, or wrong, person was in charge, they could be looking for ways to create those diseases. The exposure of magic did not bring an age of peace and contentment like so many dreamers thought. Aquarius missed the memo.

Marrows leaned against his car, mug of tea in hand, studying it.

"When did you start drinking tea?"

"Meng introduced me to this." His reply was accompanied by a shrug. Like him switching to tea was no big deal.

"That's going to put at least one coffee manufacturer out of business."

The badger rolled his eyes. "I didn't drink that much of the stuff. I used to know guys who drank so much coffee they could vibrate through a wall."

"I met a guy in Louisiana who can do that." I chuckled at the memory of the wolf as he'd landed on the pavement after I punched him as he solidified out of the bank. I'd tracked him across half a dozen states. Twice that in robberies. He'd stolen an antique from a family friend and since she didn't want him dead. She'd asked me to get it back for her.

Not a bad guy overall. Not the greatest at making snap decisions, but once he realized he couldn't beat me, we got along great.

The badger shook his head. "So many expressions don't mean the same now that magic's known. Now, when someone claims their girlfriend's light on her feet, you have to ask if they mean she can float or she's just quiet." He paused. "And even that could be magic."

"How are we doing this?" I asked, nodding to the building. Cars were parked on the side, people came and went.

"I thought you'd just go, kick in the door and punch people until they tell you what you want to know."

I took out my phone and looked through my contacts. I didn't have to; I know my family's numbers. I was making a point.

"What are you doing," Marrows asked with a smirk.

"Looking for someone better suited to that plan. What kind of body count are you looking to accumulate? If it's zero, you're shit out of luck. Even Whitney's going to drop at least one body in a place that size. If you want the place to still be standing, that puts Wolf out of the running. Aaron might leave you people to talk to afterward, but he stopped traveling alone after the yakuza nearly killed him five years ago. You know the kind of guys he travels with, so it might be best not to call him in on this."

The badger rolled his eyes. "I get it. You're not the Orr to send in to kick ass and take names."

“You must miss those days.”

“I can still kick your ass, Wyatt; don’t think otherwise.” He took the stunner out of its holster and checked it over. “It’s carrying a real weight that I miss.” Satisfied, he holstered it and walked toward the building’s entrance.

“I don’t get that part. I’ve seen Missionaries fight, even kill. Why aren’t you able to do it?”

“I can kill, just not premeditated. We’re about ensuring He has followers and protecting His flock.”

“We’re more of a harem.”

“Don’t mess with my story,” the badger warned. “In the process of defending, anything goes, so long as killing isn’t the actual plan. I’m a little too proactive for that rule. Nearly caused someone I was watching over to die when I locked up because I figured taking out an attacker before they became an actual threat to them would be simpler. I stopped carrying physical ammo after that. Magic is a bitch when it wants to be.”

I opened the door for him, and we entered a spartan lobby. White floors and walls. A screen the only black rectangle as it was turned off. One elevator behind a security desk.

“Can I help you, gentlemen,” the doberman in a rent-a-cop uniform greeted us.

Marrows snickered. “Nothing gentle about either of us.” The guard tensed as the badger leaned against the counter. “We’re here to see whoever’s responsible for the kidnapping of homeless people that’s been happening around your building.”

I kept my muzzle shut, but I admired his boldness as the guard stared at the badger in confusion.

After a few seconds, Marrows burst out in laughter. “Just kidding.” He took out a card from a brass holder and handed it to the doberman. “Tom Marrows, me and my associate are here on behalf of Steel Link Security, to explain to the people who own this building why they should drop whoever they have doing security and go with us. Don’t worry, we’re not after your job, we aim higher.”

“I think there are smoother ways to do this,” I couldn’t stop myself from saying.

The badger shrugged. “I didn’t hear you talk. Anyway, they don’t send us to be nice, remember. We’re the ones they send in when someone’s not getting the hint.” He smiled at the doberman. “Maybe you should call someone able to handle us, since it’s clearly not you.”

Swallowing, the guard placed a call, and a minute later a panda in a sharp suit stepped out of the elevator. She looked us over. “Can I help you?”

“You have this the wrong way around,” Marrows said, smiling. “We’re here to help you, you are?”

“Samantha Wrong. Head of security.”

“Ouch.”

She glared at me.

“Sorry.” I got myself under control. “That can’t have been an easy last name to grow up with.”

She was not amused. “I’ve shown enough guys like you they were wrong to say anything about my name over the years. State your business before I show you the door.”

“Security is our business.” Marrows handed her a card.

“I know about you,” she replied after looking it over and handing it back. “We don’t deal with magic.”

“But magic might decide to deal with you,” he replied. “How are you going to handle the thief who can walk through walls? The kidnapper who can teleport—”

“That’s not a thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Teleportation, it isn’t a thing.” Her statement had the definitiveness of someone who looked into it hard. Which was odd for someone who claimed not to deal with magic. It’s also wrong—I do not snicker. The Hertz kid, like Fred calls him, does it.

“Magic can do anything,” Tom said.

“No, it can’t,” she stated. “Magic bends the laws of physics. It doesn’t break them.”

“Teleportation isn’t impossible under known physics.”

She rolled her eyes. “The amount of energy needed would kill whoever tried it. If you’re trying to convince me I need to sign a contract with your company, all you’re doing is convincing me I made the right call not dealing with your kind.”

I bristled.

It isn’t often someone can get my goat, but prejudice is one way to rile me up. I can come up with reasons; like I want everyone treated equally, how in this century we should be done with such a narrow mindset. But the truth is more personal. I’ve been prejudiced against by my own family. They realized it was wrong, and they did their best to change, but I’m still an emotional mess because of it.

“My kind?” I growled.

“Easy now,” Marrows said, hand on my chest making me realize I took a step. “We’re not here to start anything.”

I’d happily finish it for her. Her smirk of satisfaction did not make standing down easy.

“There, all better,” he said. “Clearly you have your set of beliefs, but does belief keep you safe? Does it keep your projects safe? I can respect that you don’t want to deal with the magical community, but you also clearly keep your ear to the ground so you know what’s going on in the city. Denver is becoming one of the country’s larger concentrations of magic. We have half a dozen factions established here. More are looking to have a foothold. Steel Link, because our beliefs let us employ someone from each of those factions. So we have experts who can deal with a wide variety of magical threats and offer protection against such. Do you really want to rely on your beliefs to keep this place safe?”

It was all I could do to stop myself from asking just how much of that was bullshit. It sort of makes sense. The Brislow elder’s role as Champion is known in our community. Even before the Diamond incident, there had been an influx of other factions to Denver, but fully establishing themselves here? That’s unusual, to say the least. Cities only have one magical faction in them. Usually, only one subgroup of that faction is in a city. Like one family for the Society.

The Brislow elder was always a little different in that he was reaching out to the other faction even before the Church War, but he can’t have allowed them to establish a chapter house in his city, can he?

The silence stretched until it snapped with her asking. “What are you looking for here?”

“Only the same thing any sales rep wants,” Marrows replied. “Give us a tour; let us explain how we can increase your security. Once we’ve given our spiel, you can make your decisions and contact our head office so we can assign personnel.”

“You are awfully sure of yourself.”

“I’m a killer sales rep.” How Marrows could say that without bursting out in laughter, I had no idea. Still, it worked, because with a sigh she looked to the doberman.

“Malcolm, hand me two visitor’s badges.” They came with a lanyard and I slip it over my neck. Marrows studied his before doing the same, and we followed her into the elevator.

“Not showing us the basement?” I asked as she pressed the button for the second floor.

“There’s nothing there but the utilities.”

I shared a look with the badger. Now there was an invitation to snoop if I ever heard one. We walked around the floor, where she explained about the labs there, the security measures, all mundane, the personnel, and the checks they put them through to ensure they both prevented accidents and didn’t compromise the intellectual property rights of the company.

The third floor was more labs, but with more stringent containment security since here, they dealt with highly infectious diseases. Again, she rattled off their security procedures, and, somehow, Marrows looked interested. It was all I could do not to drop from boredom.

Maybe there was something to the barge in kicking thing Marrows initially proposed. Entertainment, if nothing else.

On the way to the fourth floor, where the offices were located, I rubbed my temple at the passing pain. I didn’t know boredom could cause headaches. At least it was fleeting, and then we

were walking among a hallway of doors. Each, she told us, occupied by one administrative assistant or another. She indicated the company chairman's office; the only one we could see in, and unoccupied as he was working in one of the labs. She never pointed him out during the tour. Was it because he wasn't in labs she showed us, but a secret one? She finished at her office, and as she opened the door, Marrows caught my attention and nodded to the elevator.

"I'm going to be a minute," I said as she motions us in. "I'm going to use the restroom."

She debated something, then nodded. "On the left of the elevators."

"I saw them." I headed for them, the first turn taking me out of sight. This floor had few cameras since everything here was handled digitally. I took the elevator to the basement. Wincing as the elevator started moving. Great, the headache wasn't actually gone.

The basement was disappointing in that it was exactly what Wrong said it was. A furnace, an electrical panel to cause envy in every other one. More plumbing pipes than I ever wanted to see again. Storage of equipment.

No secret lab.

Maybe we came at the wrong time. Maybe they only worked on the vagrant at night or something, instead of having a hidden lab dedicated to it. On the way back to the fourth floor, the headaches spiked again. What was it with it and elevator rides?

I opened my eyes before the door opened and stared at the panel. I don't know why, but—

"Are you getting off?" a woman in a lab coat asked.

"Sorry, no, wrong floor."

She shrugged and entered, pressing the button for the second floor and closing her eyes as the doors closed. I winced in pain as the headache punched its way through. She exited on the second floor and once the doors closed; I look at the panel again. There was something going on here. The headache always struck between floor three and four.

I went up, closing my eyes and it barely registered before the doors open.

I went back down and kept my eyes fixed on the panel. Immediately the knife planted in my head, the pain intense enough I closed my eyes, but there was something there; I almost made it out.

When the doors closed onto the basement, I pulled out a pen and wrote a quick *phrase* against pain. There was probably an official one somewhere, but I never learned it. Pain isn't something I normally have a problem dealing with.

Even with the *phrase*, the pain was there, but not so intense now, and I saw the button appear. It was there only for a fraction of a second and gone before I reached for it. I closed the door on the executive who tried to enter and went down again. This time, I had my finger on the button before it vanished and the elevator lurched to a stop.