

Chapter 12

Paul woke to his head pounding, tension in his wrists, shoulders, and back, and somewhere beyond that, sounds of rustling fabric. The tension was from being hunched forward and held in place by his wrists tied at his back. The headache had to be from whatever hit him. The fabric was...?

He cracked an eye open as saw his boxer-covered crotch. Good thing he'd washed them when he'd showered in the morning. His mother had raised him to always wear clean underwear, but being on the run had made that tough. Once this was over, he'd work on putting together a go-bag. It would have a week's worth of underwear in it.

"Hey," a man said. "Look who's awake."

So much for learning anything while pretending to be unconscious. Paul straightened and had to bite back the sigh of relief as the pressure on his wrists and back vanished.

The room wasn't what he'd expected. No large penthouse, with all the amenities. This room had two double beds, a dresser, a desk and a screen on the wall. It was larger than the motel rooms he'd stayed in over the last few days, but that was all he could say. Five of them, plus him, made the room feel almost as small as those. For magic people, they weren't living it large.

The buffalo and Koala sat on the chairs watching him with predatory expressions, while the gorilla was on the bed, his clothing piled next to him and going through Paul's pants pockets. Even the mismatched gloves were there. His protest over the invasion of his privacy was cut short by noticing the rhinoceros leaning against the wall, and the oddest telescope in his hands. The surface was pitted black, and it had knobs on the end where the eyepiece was.

Next to him, sitting on the edge of the window, the chimpanzee held a gold cane—no, brass—with bumps and valleys and... were those letters? He canted his head until some were legible.

L. O. V. E.

That was a strange thing to have written on a bumpy cane, and on the bumps, more like the—

It wasn't a cane. It was a staff. And with those bumps in set of four, made of brass. He'd seen brass knuckles in some of the older gangster movies he'd watched with Niel and Roland. And the chimpanzee had a staff of them.

No wonder the impact had knocked him out so hard.

And now it was clear the other wasn't holding a telescope. That was a staff too, and considering what was happening in Denver, it wasn't a telescope, but a microscope staff.

"I'd love to see you deny you know who we are," the chimpanzee said.

Paul looked at him, aiming for a confused expression.

The rhinoceros laughed. "Don't go into acting. Trust me on that."

The gorilla pulled the phone out of Paul's jacket and turned it over. He had locked it, right? He, and the others without staves, had, instead, guns at their belts.

"Now," the rhinoceros said, "how about you tell me what the two Practitioners you're traveling with can do?" he raised a hand as Paul was about to protest. "And this is just to make my life easier. We'll find out that you tell me or not, but I'd rather learn from you, instead of her."

Paul shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about." He continued over the rhino's chuckle. "I do room service. I'm not traveling with anyone."

"I don't think hotel employees are allowed phones that do this." The gorilla stopped swiping and turned Paul's phone so he saw the screen and the odd-colored waves moving on it. "How do you explain that?" She asked.

He didn't have any apps that did that. Shila hadn't said anything about the apps she added doing that, but he didn't put it past her to have added something without telling him.

Paul looked at the rhino and shook his head.

"You have no idea how glad I am," the chimpanzee said, stepping away from the window and slapping the staff into his palm. Paul felt the shockwave that caused from where he sat on the other side of the room.

The rhino put his staff in the chimpanzee's way. "No. I need him with his head still attached to his body. Joshua, why don't you explain to Mister Heeran why it's to his advantage to cooperate with us?"

"It'll be my pleasure." The koala smiled and stepped forward. Paul couldn't believe that accent was real. There was no way people from Boston spoke like that. "You gonna answer the question?"

Paul's head snapped to the side from the impact, only halfway to shaking his head, and he saw stars. He'd always thought that was a figure of speech.

The koala centered his head and wound back. Paul's eyes went wide in fear before he closed them and braced himself.

"You just got to tell him what he wanna know."

Paul swallowed. The fist hit him from the other side before he started shaking his head. There was so much force in the blow Paul thought his spine would wrench out of his back when his head snapped.

"So you know," the koala said. "I like doing this. So I want you to hold out as long as you can."

"You're a sadist," Paul mumbled, the fought not to throw up as he tasted blood swallowing.

"What you wanna me to say? Needed a hobby." This punch rattled Paul's teeth.

Another one he'd thought was a figure of speech. He hadn't signed up for this. He opened his eyes, discovering only one of them cooperated, and glared at the glee on the koala's face. He clamped his mouth shut. He wasn't giving that guy the satisfaction.

The koala smirked, and the next punch caught Paul under the muzzle, and lifted him, and the chair, off the floor. He landed off balance and the chair's legs snapped. He crashed on his back hard enough he thought the breaking sounds had to come from his bones.

The Koala yanked him up hard and Paul realized he wouldn't hold out. He had never realized how much pain hurt. He'd heard stories; people describing how pain had taking over their body after an accident, but they hadn't accurately explained how it didn't just take over. It was the only thing left, and the idea it could get worse was more than he could stand.

He glanced at the rhinoceros, and the satisfied smile made it clear he, too, knew it was simply a question of how much pain it would take. Again, Paul clamps his muzzle shut, wincing at the pain. Maybe he'd talk, but not right now, and if he was lucky, the Koala would miscalculate and break his neck when he punched him again.

The door exploded inward just as Paul's phone rang. The gorilla dropped it like it was burning and stood just before the call connected and his ears stopped ringing.

No, it wasn't because of the phone. He and the others were readying themselves for a fight. Donal's voice sounded behind him. They were here to rescue him.

They were about to get their asses handed to him.

Paul didn't question his clear thinking or the fact the pain was a shadow of what it had been before the door exploded. He shoulder the koala away from him and ran for the chimpanzee. Shila and Donal could deal with the guns and even the other staff, but they weren't expecting a combat staff. And even if they'd made plans for it, Shila's thing wasn't the physical, and Donal dealt with lost stuff. How ready could they be against this?

So it was his job to keep the chimpanzee out of the fight they were involved in.

The chimp stepped out of the way and Paul turned on his toes, trying to a spin kick. He missed, but the chimpanzee shifted his focus to him, a grin splitting his muzzle. He swung at Paul, holding the staff by the shaft, but Paul knew to watch for the whole thing and quickly danced out of the way.

His hands tied behind his back limited what he could do, but his opponent was slow and not skilled. He seemed to rely on the power of his staff to get the job done.

All Paul had to do was stay out of reach.

Like that was going to be possible in a hotel room where other people were also fighting.

He had to end this fast.

He ducked left, zigged right, and in a move that would make Niel proud, if he lived to tell his friend about it, his foot landed squarely in the chimpanzee's balls. Paul winced in sympathy at the pain on the man's face. The staff clattered to the floor, and the chimpanzee was in a ball, holding his crotch and, possibly, crying.

Paul was too busy dropping to the floor to get his tied arms under his feet and before him to check. His shoulders unbunched and he was on his feet again.

The koala was down, as was the gorilla. Shila faced the rhinoceros, while Donal, somehow, held his own against the buffalo.

Nina stepped into the room, and Paul was about to tell her to go back outside when he noticed she held the Merlin's cane by the handle, instead of carrying it, the way it was meant to be held. The staff had called to her after all, and she'd answered. He frowned as she raised the cane. There was something different about the confidence in her movement, the smile on her lips.

It came down and, as the tip hit the floor, it might as well have hit Paul in the balls. He stopped to his knees, hand on his crotch. Fuck, that hurt. Out of the corner of his tearing eyes, the chimpanzee relaxed.

Paul looked up at Nina, and the wrongness registered fully. Her eyes were filled with a glee that looked a lot like what had been in the koala's when he'd punched Paul.

Oh, fuck.

She was Chamber.

The smile, as she looked at him, was confirmation. She delighted in inflicting pain on him. The pain of the kick to the balls he'd administered on the chimpanzee.

Fuck, it hurt.

Paul pushed himself up.

But he'd already suffered so much pain it seemed to have gone numb. But he had the memories. And the knowledge he had been about to tell them everything he knew just so the pain would end.

He locked eyes on the hare. Was Nina even her real name? Had she been Merlin's nurse?

He kept track of the chimpanzee out of the corner of his eye as he grabbed the brass-knuckle staff and got to his feet.

Paul counted on their overconfidence. He was just a guy helping a friend of a friend. He'd told Nina that much. She'd seen him fight and win, but that had been against normal people. People driven desperate by what she and her group had engineered. And they had magic, while he didn't.

Paul didn't know enough people in the magical community to say they were all dependent on their magic, but he had certainly noticed a trend.

When the chimpanzee wound back, holding the staff like a baseball bat, his motion was slow again, clumsy. Paul ducked at the last instant and rushed forward, ignoring his screaming balls. Even if Nina had transferred the damage along with the pain, it was nothing compared to what she could bring if he didn't stop her. He hated what he was about to do, but she hadn't left him any choice.

He wound back as he entered striking range and the hare's confidence broke as he glare hatefully at her. She raised her hands to protect herself and, just like he'd done, closed her eyes in anticipation of the coming pain.

Paul smiled and open his hand. He could sacrifice his normal life, if it meant saving Shila, Donal, and everyone else the Chamber was making suffer. His finger closed around the shaft of the cane, ready to pull it out of her hand—

He flew across the room before he understood how it had happened. His body was rigid, the way being electrocuted caused. He slammed against the wall hard enough he knew he was going to end up with a concussion.

This better be the last time, he thought as darkness closed in on him, because three time's a pattern.