

Chapter 21

"There no way," Paul stated. "I never went through the ceremonies."

"I've been on the receiving end of their influence, Mister Heeran," the cheetah replied. "And I've tapped it often enough to recognize it. You have the Orr's influence, therefore, you are one of them." He looked at the bear, who was turning in the air, scrambling to reach his pants before they fell off his feet. "Alan, are you in control again?" The pants pulled up until the bear grabbed them.

"Getting seasick, sir, but no longer feeling like I need to bone you."

The bear lowered to the ground, righting himself as he put his other leg in the pants, then had both feet on the floor, putting himself away.

That Thomas hadn't taken his eyes off Paul was almost more unusual than a floating bear, as far as the tiger was concerned, since he was muscular and well hung.

"Good, how about you take Mister Hertz outside, me and Mister Heer—"

"Paul, My name's Paul. I'm pretty sure you know it, too."

"I'm staying," Thomas said, shaking himself. "I'm not leaving—"

"Mister Hertz," the cheetah said before Paul could reply, "I think it's best if you put some distance between you and Mis—Paul."

"Come—" The bear went to put a hand on Thomas's shoulder, but the rat was no longer there, now standing next to Paul, arms crossed over his chest.

"You should do what he says," Paul said. "You haven't exactly been acting like yourself around me."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "Really? Wanting to fuck you isn't acting like myself?"

"The point you didn't notice him entering? Yes. I'll be fine. And I have questions too."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I am."

The bear opened the door, and after another look at Paul, Thomas exited.

"You're waiting on the other side," Denton said as the bear was closing the door.

"I don't think it's—" Alan yelped as he lifted and passed through the opening door, which closed behind him. There was a muffled thump.

"I swear," the cheetah said with a sigh. "It's like no one ever remembers I'm the boss. Now, Mis—"

"Don't you want to fuck me?" Paul asked. "Or are you able to resist it?"

"Are you trying to influence me?" Denton replied with a smirk.

"I'm not doing anything."

"I know you believe that, Paul, but you are."

"Fine, then how to I turn it off?"

The cheetah tilted an ear.

"Come on," Paul said, mildly exasperated. "You turned it on and off, so you have to know how."

"I started and stopped tapping your ability. My understanding is that the influence is simply a question of willing it, which I believe when you say you aren't doing, so you are going to have to work out what the mechanism of your version of their ability is."

Paul dropped on the bed. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. I'd suggest trying to figure out when you are and aren't influencing someone so that you can figure out how you're feeling. When I first started learning about my ability, I spent a lot of

time learning to let go.”

Paul stared at the cheetah.

“My ability was different from yours,” the cheetah said. “But in the meantime, I think you also need to keep your distances from your friend, at least. I was targeting you when Alan burst through the door. So there is something other than conscious intent at play here.”

Paul nodded. How long would he have to stay away from his best friend? Of anyone else?

Denton squeezed his shoulder. “You’ll be okay, Paul. We pretty much all have to go through a version of what you’re going through when we get out abilities. You’re just more confusing because it’s not acting the way it should be acting. You’ll figure things out.”

“Thanks,” he replied distractedly.

Why only Thomas? And Donal, he added? And why had both only acted mainly more affectionately, while the bear had basically ripped the pants off the cheetah? He looked for him to ask, but he was alone.

How could he be an Orr? How could his mother dismiss one of them as ‘not important’? They ran a city? He reached for his phone, but the clip was empty. Right, Wassa had it so she could talk with Grant.

And now wasn’t the best time to call his mother demanding answers. She had nothing to do with how frustrated he felt, and who said anything about him being directly related to the family in San Francisco Bay? His father was probably utterly unremarkable because he didn’t need to maintain the ultimate tough guy facade to keep people in their place.

And he’d have to explain how he came to find out about his father, which made not mentioning a car chase, taking part in saving Denver, and a trip to Iceland and back difficult. She was already worried enough about him living half a dozen states away. Adding he had magical problems to that wouldn’t help.

It certainly wasn’t helping him.

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Paul let out a breath and stood.

Enough sulking.

He couldn’t deny it anymore. His attempt at working out why he was doing this and how to turn it off had devolved into a sulk, and that wasn’t helping anything.

He opened the door, surprised not to find the bear there, to ensure Paul didn’t leave and unleash that influence on everyone in the house. He made sure Thomas wasn’t close by, then headed for the bathroom.

“Non.” Thomas’s voice sounded from the kitchen as he reached the bathroom door. “Tu dois t’assurer que Jacques n’est pas impliquer.”

He passed the door and glanced into the kitchen. Thomas leaned against the counter, eyes closed and phone to his ear.

French and Jacques’s name meant he was talking to one of the Mercier. Probably about keeping Jacques from going off to attack the Chamber. Paul’s French amounted to oui, non, and merci, which he’d picked up on a trip to Paris Thomas took him on.

Ever since the Chamber had killed Hubert, the badger was on the warpath, and Thomas had made it his mission to keep his indestructible friend from finding out if there was a limit to his power.

Paul returned to the bathroom, relieved himself, then, making sure Thomas wasn’t looking in his direction, hurried past the kitchen door to the living room.

He stopped on seeing the muscular raccoon casually leaning against the wall by the door.

“Just here to make sure no one bothers y’all,” he said with a slight souther accent. “The boss going people heading here to secure the house.”

“Didn’t Donal reactivate his wards?” Paul asked, now noticing Grant hunched over his phone and Wassa looking through the boxes on the floor.

“Wouldn’t know nothing ‘bout that. Not magical myself, but if they were any good, the boss wouldn’t bother getting people here.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if Donal was here,” Grant said without looking up.

“You got that right,” the raccoon replied with a grin. “Boss also said that should I think boning your stripes or having you bone me was a good idea. I was to get out of Dodge pronto, or else.”

“Let me guess,” Paul said dryly. “He threatened to remove your balls.”

“Oh, no.” The raccoon looked offended Paul suggested that. “That’s why he has Mister Marrow around, that and to fuck us till we can’t remember our names anymore. The boss just reminds us he’s the one authorizing the transfer of my pay to my bank.”

“And that’s all it takes?” Paul asked. Even if the man said he wasn’t Society, he’d expected sexual threat

to have more of an impact.

The raccoon raised an eyebrow and tilted an ear. "You try feeding three husbands without Link's premium paychecks."

"Two wasn't enough?" Paul asked before he could stop himself.

"Way too much loving in this heart-o-mine to stop at to." The raccoon became serious. "If you're heading out, I'm gonna have to ask you wait till the others get here. The boss didn't want to worry you lot, but when we got here, people went running off. He's thinking they were some of those Chamber the lady talked about. Like those he and Alan carried when they left." [I realized we utterly forgot to account for the Chamber who had been in the bedroom when the gang teleported in. I added a line when Paul goes to Thomas in the bedroom, indicating he notices they are missing, but things get too hectic for him to find out where they are. I figure Thomas did a line-of-sight teleport to take them into the guest bedroom when he noticed them once he reappeared in the bedroom, escaping Denton]

"No one's going anywhere," Grant said, then muttered, "Ever, the way these videos don't explain one damned thing about metal smithing." He glanced at the seal as she pulled a toy car from a box and turned it over in her hand, studying it as if what it was, or possibly the concept it embodied, would reveal itself. Then the kangaroo was glaring at his phone again.

Paul sat next to her. "Can I help you with anything?" as a woman, they should be safe with her this close. She might be the only one in the house who was safe from him.

"I do not know," she said, smiling. She exchanged the toy with a small flashlight. She turned it, and Paul lowered her hand as she pointed the bulb to her face. It was probably broken, but why take the chance. "I knew the world would change while I slumbered, but I did not understand how much." She took a box of color pencils that opened and spilled its content. "And Grant tells me all this only happened in the last hundred years."

"More like hundred and fifty," Paul replied.

She smiled as she studied a cerulean pencil. "My family had lived the same way, fishing the sea, for so many generations that we could not conceive it is ever changing. Even once I found I could channel the world's creativity, what I did with it was nothing like this." She took a drill from the box and seemed amazed by the weight. "What is this?"

"It's a drill."

She looked at him in confusion.

"It's a tool. We use it to build... well, it can build a variety of things."

"A crafter's tool." She closed her eyes. "It would be the idea of assembling something, improving it."

"Or taking something apart. But it'll need different attachments."

Her eyes snapped open in surprise. "This contains contradicting ideas?"

Grant chuckled.

"I guess." Paul hesitated. "We don't really think of them as contradictions, just different facets of how construction works. I'm more of an applied theorist, at this point, when someone who actively builds anything, and I have no idea how I'd go about explaining the tool involved in biochemistry in a way you'd understand."

"Alchemy?" she asked.

Paul started to contradict her and stopped. "I guess the chemistry would be the equivalent of that. I mean, we don't exactly use cauldrons anymore, but some of the machines do play an equivalent role. And chemistry is the science of turning something into another thing."

"Such as turning lead into gold?" she asked, with a hint of mockery.

"No, I couldn't do that, but it's because I focus on biology." He paused and looked for a better way to explain it. "My research will involve dealing with organic chemistry, while lead and gold are inorganic. But, it has been done, lead to gold, I mean. There were a few research papers about the process, and there's a video from a laboratory, but it was only a proof of concept. To demonstrate it could be done. It takes too much energy, and the process isn't stable. It degrades back into lead over time."

She smiled. "Then not all have been improved by the passage of time."

"I wouldn't go as far as saying—wait. Are you saying you can turn lead into gold?"

"What's gold?" Grant asked without looking up from his phone, while Wassa seemed to formulate an explanation.

"A precious metal," Paul answered.

"Go deeper, not the element, the concept."

He considered it. "Wealth, value, malleability."

"That's a good start. Now, concepts can be altered or moved. The most powerful magics use the essence of an item, but it's possible to remove them, or alter it in some way, or add to them, like moving one concept from one item to another. If you start with something already almost like what you're looking to affect, like how lead has the same weight, and malleability as gold, then adding another concept can bridge the gap. Add enough of the concept of value lead, and you get—"

"Fool's gold," Paul said. "You're talking about fool's gold."

Grant chuckled and looked up. "Not only fools fall for it, but that one doesn't last. Still, you get the idea."

"So, you could make 'fake gold' that would—"

The phone around Wassa's neck rang. It was identified as a Denver number, but Paul didn't know it.

"You gonna answer?" the raccoon said, looking at his phone.

Wassa handed it to Paul.

"Hello?"

"Paul, it's Denton." The man sounded far too jovial for Paul's liking.

"Hi." He looked at the raccoon for some sign of what this was about, but he shrugged. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, this isn't about me. You came up in a conversation with someone I know and now he'd extremely interested in meeting you."

"And...who is that person?" Could he convince Thomas to teleport him to South Africa? Would that be far enough to alleviate the bad feeling he felt coming on?

"Arnold," Denton stated.

"Arnold who?" Paul asked cautiously.

He heard the smile as the cheetah answered him. "Why. Arnold Orr, of course."

No, South Africa would be nowhere near far enough. If even a fraction of the stories about the Orrs Paul had heard were true, he'd have to be on the moon to keep this meeting from happening.