

Chapter 17

Grant stilled in the middle of cursing, face growing hard. “What happened?”

Paul shook his head as Donal looked at him. This was definitely Practitioner business, and he had an arm full of shocked rat already. Shila had saved Thomas at least once, that Paul knew for certain, so the two had been as close to friends as the pangolin allowed.

When Donal finished explaining about the epidemic, Merlin being taken out, the Chamber’s involvement, ending with Shila’s sacrifice, Grant asked how she’d even found herself in Denver, and Donal looked at Paul.

So he’d started explaining about the Chamber’s attacks in San Francisco, and then was distracted, calming Thomas and reassuring him everyone was safe. He’d resumed his telling with the car chase, the jump off the golden gate bridge, the drive to Denver, which took the story to where Donal had started.

“Where are the staves?” Grant demanded. “Tell me you weren’t stupid enough to leave them in that SUV when it died.”

“I’m not an idiot, Grant,” Donal snapped. “They’re in the mail.” [since this is the first actual mention of them being in the mail (when I thought there was an actual scene showing it. I went back to the plane and rewrote it so it’s mentioned there that Donal mailed them)]

The kangaroo stared at Donal, then looked at Paul, who shrugged. He’d been there, but couldn’t explain what the squirrel had done anymore than what he’d said. And he had a rat handsily checking that the golden tiger was okay. If he didn’t know Thomas so well, Paul would be protesting.

“You mailed them?” Grant asked in disbelief. “To who? You know the Chamber’s going to find out and they’re going to—”

“Do you have any idea how easily packages get lost in the mail?” Donal replied. “I barely had to do anything to make sure it happened.”

“Fine.” Grant glared. “Where are they going, and when do I need to be there to retrieve them?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Donal replied, thought his hands up. “You seemed to me missing the point of things getting lost. Don’t worry, I should be able to make sure they get back to me once we want them.”

“Should?” Grant demanded, his tone growing dark.

“Thomas,” Donal called.

“What?” the rat stiffened, moving his hand away from Paul’s belt, which he’d been about to undo. He was being thorough in his checking on Paul’s condition. Thomas shook himself, looked between the two.

“What did I—”

“Remind me, just how much control did Grant have over his staff? You know, back when he had one?”

“He...” Thomas hesitated. “Well, it usually got...”

“I get your point, Donal,” Grant admitted, finally losing his anger. “But now, the problem you’ve given me is that I need to make sure you survive Shila’s idiot plan. Because while you think you should be able to retrieve them, I know without a fucking doubt I can’t do it without you. If we even figure out where the one we’re currently after is.”

“Actually,” Thomas said, “I figured out a way around that problem. I know the sensory phrase. So, me and Paul can fuck here to ensure I’ve imprinted this place. Then I take them both back to Denver, Paul fucks me once we get there, because I’m going to need it, Then I bring just him back, and he fucks me here because I’m not going to be familiar enough with this place to be functional with anything less than two fucks.” He gave Paul his, I’m so smart grin, and the golden tiger had to fight not to laugh.

“What are you thinking?” Grant demanded, glaring. We’re not splitting up. Did you miss the part about one of the Chamber showing up at Donal’s house? They’re going to have that under watch. And don’t bring up the other landing points you have there. They knew all your landing spot in San Francisco and blew them up. They’re going to at least be watching those in Denver.

Thomas lost his grin and looked much younger as he bit his lower lip. “Sorry, I forgot about that.” He brightened. “I know other phrases, and Paul can get a lot of cum out of me. I’ll write a bunch of protection on Donal before we get back here.”

“Grant,” Paul said, trying not to stare at his best friend. It had been amusing how eager he was to have sex, but this setting someone’s safety aside for it wasn’t like him. “Tell me you haven’t been starving him of sex”

“Of Course not. We haven’t exactly had the time since getting here, but it’s only been ten hours at the most since we fucked last.”

“What?” Thomas turned his lecherous grin on Paul. “I missed you.”

“He’s here now, all hale and healthy. So put it back in your pants. We need to find the staff before the Chamber finds us.” Then he grumbled, “Why did it have to be fucking well hidden?”

“Can’t Donal help with that? It being hidden and all?” Paul was so used to Thomas being naked it hadn’t registered his cock was out already, and hard, and leaking, and ready to—once they were done the two of them were spending a day in bed, or wherever they ended up, and fucking.

“I can,” Donal said, “if I get some information on it. With the Chamber around hiding so they can catch you, just searching for a hidden staff is going to get us walking right into them.”

“Yeah...” Grant trailed off. “That might not be as easy as we’d like. The staff, it might be... well, all I’ve had to piece this together are translations from older Gaelic texts that weren’t in the best of conditions to start with, and I’m not even sure if—”

“It’s the Lady of the Lake,” Thomas said, a grin wiping the lust off his face.

“Maybe,” Grant said, uncomfortably.

“As in the legend of King Arthur?” Paul asked. “The one with Merlin?”

Donal stared at the kangaroo in disbelief.

“I know, right?” Thomas said excitedly. “I couldn’t believe she was real, either. Got to make you wonder if Merlin’s real too, or what other legends are true too.”

“Don’t blow this out of proportion, Thomas,” Grant warned. “Until we find it, we won’t know if the translations are even—”

“That’s another one that’s real,” Paul said with a chuckle.

“Another what?” Grant asked.

“Me and Shila came across a Chamber with Joseph’s Coat of Many Colors on our way to Denver. It looked like she was part of how the Chamber controlled the story of the epidemic.”

Grant sighed. “Webber’s staff has no connection to biblical times other than how we’re all connected to that time. I don’t know if Webber created it, or found it, but someone documented it contains polyester, so it can’t be any older than the nineteen-thirties.”

“Okay. But still, now we have the Lady of the Lake’s staff.” He grinned at Thomas. “Tell me you ran that by Niel. It makes me wonder if Shila was—” Paul’s gaze paused on Donal on the way to looking at Grant again. The squirrel was looking into the distance.

The kangaroo turned to follow where he looked. “Do you have it?” he asked.

“I have...” Donal frowned, “something.”

“How far?” Grant asked, moving next to him.

“Not sure. Deeper, I can tell that.”

“What are we doing about these people?” Paul indicated the unconscious Chambers on the ground.

“Nothing,” Grant replied. “We don’t have the time. The best thing we can do is get the staff, then have Thomas teleport us out of here and deal with whoever the Chamber has watching that location.”

“I won’t be able to keep us hidden,” Donal said. “This is like nothing I’ve had to find before. It’s going to take everything I have.”

“Staves will do that to you,” the kangaroo replied. “We’ll handle anyone we come across. Just get us to the staff. And don’t you fucking think of over-stressing yourself. I’ve lost one friend too many already.” He pulled items Paul couldn’t identify out of pockets and started assembling them into... well, it’d be a talisman, whatever it ended up looking like.

“Is that going to help?” Paul asked. “You’re not the one with the staff about hiding.”

“No, but I’m the only one here who spent years evading the Chamber.” Grant grinned. “I’d like to think I’ve gotten damned well acquainted with the concept of not being found.”

Thomas leaned into Paul’s ear and whispered, “That’s why we’ve been in so many fights recently.”

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Paul punched the otter in the muzzle as hard as he could, and the man dropped. The other good was also unconscious, and Grant was helping Donal to his feet after shoving him out of the way when the fight started.

This was the third one.

Grant's talisman hadn't proved effective at hiding them, but he had one to warn of approaching people and they'd been able to ready the offensive and catch them by surprise. Thomas had kept them from warning anyone by popping in, grabbing the phones and popping out, while Grant and Paul took care of the fighting. Grant had taken the time of the walk to add talisman to Paul's jacket, and his hits landed more often and with more impact.

Thomas broke the last phone. "How long until they realize how many of the people in here aren't responding anymore?"

"It's why we need to keep going," Grant replied. "Donal?"

"We're closer."

The kangaroo muttered something unflattering, but nodded, and they were moving again.

The tunnels went from being all stones, to having ice mixed in. In place, it was clear enough light made its way down from the surface through them. How far were they from the edge of the... glacier? Mountain? Paul didn't know what something made of both was called. The light faded, and they relied on Grant and Thomas's phone, which were powered by talisman, to see the way.

When Donal stopped, they were in a large cavern, illuminated faintly through the ice above them. He looked at the wall of ice, which looked like a frozen waterfall, and said, not sounding entirely certain, "it's... here."

"I'm not seeing a staff," Thomas said.

"Lady of the lake," Grant replied, shining his light at the frozen water. "More likely than not, it's inside the ice."

"Do any of you have something to melt through this?" Paul asked, "because I didn't bring a pickax."

"I can manage something," Grant mused. "A lot of stuff carries heat within their concept."

"Or we can use the provided magical unlock," Thomas said, his lighting shining on the imprint of a hand, melted in the ice. He put his hand on it, only to yank it away, cursing. "Never mind, it's a trap." He shook his arm. "Doesn't hurt as much as touching your staves, but it still stings."

Donal studied the imprint, then placed his hand on it. He held it for a second, then slowly moved it away, looking at the waterfall. "Nothing."

"Paul, try it," Grant instructed. "It might be set so someone outside the factions has to retrieve it. It would be one way to ensure the Chamber wasn't who got their hands on it."

"Yeah, about that..."

Grant stared at the golden tiger.

"You too?" Thomas said, far too eagerly.

"What the fuck is it with Minneapolis?" Grant demanded. "Is there some magnet for foundlings? No, that's not a thing. Fuck, I hope that's not a thing."

"You want to try it?" Donal asked,

"No point in it if it didn't work for you." The kangaroo searched through his pockets. "We're going to have to melt the ice."

A flicker of motion in his peripheral vision caught Paul's attention, and he stepped out of the way of the punch, striking back, before he considered what he was doing. The fox staggered back, surprised.

Others stepped out of the shadows as the fox came at him. Paul moved easily. Grant hadn't mentioned anything about that, but one of the talisman had to make it so Paul knew how to step within the fight, like it was dance only he knew. He saw the opening and punched. The fox grimaced in pain.

He noticed Thomas fighting with a bear and Paul wondered why he didn't teleport out of reach, and suffered for the distraction, wincing as some of the fox's punch made it through the thick jacket and talisman protection. Paul landed two punches in succession and the fox went down.

He turned to go help Thomas and watched as the rat planted a knee in the woman's stomach, then an elbow to her face and she, too, went down. Thomas grinned and raised his arm. There was something metallic around his wrist.

Paul started to ask about it, but a howl had him looking around in fear. It was there, in the shadows, ready to jump in, tear him apart, feast on his—

Something landed on him and Paul lashed out in mindless fear. He had to get them off, save himself. Then they had him, his face against the frozen ground. The howl ended, and Paul could think again, but it was

too late. Whoever held him was too strong.

“I told you I would find you again,” a deep voice said. “We are the same. You should not have fled.”

The muscular mouse holding Paul pulled him to his feet, and he saw the monster of wolf glaring down at Grant. He couldn't believe there was someone larger than Dietrich out there, and he had a military bearing that match the fatigue stretched over his body, with only a metallic collar around his neck to break the image of a general looking down at some recruit.

The kangaroo was held to his knees by a pair of muscular moose. Thomas was held at gunpoint, playing with the metal bracelet as if he wanted to pull his hand out of it, and Donal had his hand over his head in surrender.

“You can't think I'd want to hang around you with the company you keep,” Grant replied with derision. “Or are they the ones keeping you?”

“Ouch,” a vole said, stepping into the light. “That hurts. GW is with us of his own volition, isn't that right?”

“Sure, Kingsley. Take off the collar and let's find out.”

“How about it, GW?” the vole asked amicably. “Why don't you take it off?”

Instead of replying, the giant wolf sniffed the air, then walked around Grant and his captor.

“GW,” the vole called in annoyance. “I asked—”

“I like my collar,” the wolf replied, distracted.

“What are you doing?”

“There is...” the wolf scented the air again. “A smell.” He stepped to the waterfall and looked at the handprint.

The vole shrugged and pulled out a revolver. “I suppose it's better this way. Now he doesn't have to see his precious Grant die.” He aimed it at the kangaroo's head as the wolf places his hand on the handprint.

The quake was sudden, sending the man holding Paul to the ground, while he stepped to the quick rhythm and stayed on his feet. The snapping of ice followed as people got to their feet and Paul ran for the vole before he could get his bearing back and shoot Grant from where he lay.

He stopped as the ice waterfall shattered, sending ice flying.

Behind it, a woman was held in a clear block of ice.

Paul swallowed at the gossamer white dress the seal wore moved, and revealed much more of her than he'd ever expected to see of a woman. Then the motion registered, as if she stood in a soft breeze.

Or, he realized as she opened her eyes, underwater.

The jet of water hit him hard enough Paul blacked out immediately.