

Chapter 38

Paul's steps slowed as he started to make out voices from the camp; something was wrong.

It wasn't with the camp; he was confident of that. The voices were what he'd gotten used to hearing from military types who were relaxing, along with the moans and groans of sex. No, it was something else.

Something flicked in his peripheral vision and he might have dismissed it as his imagination or stress, but after the Chamber had appeared out of nowhere at the lake, and knowing Wassa had passed along information...

They'd blocked communications between inside and outside the forcefield, but just that would have told any Chamber on the outside something was going on.

Gun in one hand and phone on the other, scrolling through the names for Josephs so he could warn him of—

Gunshots sounded all around. From the camp and from behind him.

Paul ran. He didn't have to think about it. He ran the way he'd come from. Joseph would lead his people and anyone else there was a part of one security force or another. In that direction, the best Paul could hope for was to not be in the way as the experts dealt with the situation.

Grant only had a dozen people with him, which included the tiger's best friend. With those numbers, even someone as untrained as he was could make a positive difference.

He fired before the why even registered, then a form fell to the ground, rolled on their back, machine gun in hand, and Paul threw himself to the side an instant before they fired.

He rolled, made out the not quite right way the browns and greens and grays and blacks were arranged and grabbed them, pulling the camouflaged Chamber between him and the next volley of bullets.

Even as he considered the machine gun strapped to her chest would be more effective than his gun, other wrongness in the surrounding colors registered.

He dropped as he let go of the body. Kicked out and someone fell. He punched hard, and another one staggered back. A round kick and another was on their back as the first one came at him.

Paul smiled and took aim, only to be horrified that his hand was empty.

He blocked and stepped around the body.

The man dodged his counter, and the return punch made Paul wince. When he knew there had been enough force in it, he should be screamed in pain. Go Arnold. He cough the next punch in a hand, only for his head to snap to the side from the impact of the man's other punch.

He tasted blood as he slowly righted his head and glared at the man. The look of terror that caused was surprisingly satisfying. He punched him three times, letting go of the fist with the last one, and the man fell to the ground. With a snarl, Paul raised his foot to

bring the boot down on the man's neck.

Gunshots sent him for cover instead, searching for the shooter.

It came again, too far to be aimed at him, and from the direction his friends were in. He put that he'd been about to murder a man in cold blood out of his mind to be dealt with later and moved. He elbowed the woman who'd been sneaking toward him in the face with hardly a thought.

He was out of his fucking mind to be running toward the fighting, instead of away. Maybe it was Arnold's anger, Aaron's love of fighting, or Alexander's certainty that he'd get his hand on a gun before he got there, but he didn't care about his sanity.

All he wanted was the certainty that his friends would be okay.

He had the man by the wrist and pulling off balance before he even realized the punch had been coming. Then they were both on the ground, Paul on top of the man, punching until the face was mashed and bloody and his opponent no longer fighting back.

He unclipped the machine gun and fired at the muzzle flashes before running again.

He fired at any patch that registered as wrong and only once was it not a camouflaged Chamber and bark exploded. When the machine gun clicked empty, Paul used it on the next Chamber and it shattered under the impact against the man's chest. The man being taken off his feet before the kick sent him flying back was more satisfying than shooting them at—

He staggered to the side, his head ringing annoyingly. He straightened and glared at the stunned someone who still held her machine gun up, butt forward, after smashing it in the side of his head. She tried again, but he blocked it with his arm and punched her once.

Down she went.

He looked at his forearm. How mush was it going to be by the time this was—

His shoulder threw him off balance, and he danced with the momentum to stay standing. The gunshot registered as he put a steady foot down and a second one rang out. No impact, so they missed. He turned to face them and found himself looking at the business end of a machine gun with an angry koala behind it.

A flash of blue passed between them, then the machine gun, as well as hands holding it, fell to the ground. More ribbons of water flew around and through the koala as surprised turned to pain and then he, too, dropped.

The seal in the shimmering blue gown registered in the corner of his eyes and Paul grabbed the machine gun off the ground and had it pointed at her when he realized she had to be where the water that saved him came from.

"I'm confused," he says, not moving the machine gun off her.

"I have saved your life," Wassa replied. "I fail to see what is confusing about that."

Paul glanced around, trying to gauge how far he'd made it, but all he had to go by was the still distant fighting.

"Why?"

"I believe the expressions is," she said, annoyed, "I'm on your side."

"Except that you sold us off to the Chamber. Twice."

She motioned, and it took all of Paul's willpower not to fire. To his left and behind him, a man screamed in pain, which became a gurgle. Paul didn't want to see what his imagination was telling him Wassa did.

"I did not. I manipulated them into creating the storm that will guarantee we win."

“Grant,” Paul replied. “That hope thing.”

“You are not one of us, therefore I do not expect you to understand. Grant is the strongest of us, all of us, but only when things become hopeless. We can only win by being at our strongest.”

“You’re right, I don’t get it.” He knew keeping her in his sight did no good. She could just think water into protecting her, or killing him, but the part of that was added to his instinct with Alex’s gift whispered that all he needed was the right angle and there was nothing she’d be able to do to stop the bullet from passing through her brain.

He lowered the machine gun. Only, taking her out wouldn’t help the situation.

“You do get that Grant is going to be royally pissed if this is a ploy, right?”

“Once this is over,” she said with a genuine smile, “and the Chamber has been put in their place, I will gladly submit to his anger.”

Paul shook his head to clear the disbelief, then turned toward the fighting. “Come on. We’d better make sure he and the others survive so Grant can shut all of this down.” He ran.

“You must have faith in him,” she replied, effortlessly keeping up with him.

“I’m going to have a lot more faith to give once I know he’s going to stay alive.”

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Paul punched another Chamber.

Where the fuck were they all coming from? Do they have vats in the wood they were growing Chamber to replace those Paul and Wassa had taken down? He elbowed the one behind him and heard ribs break. A glance showed him the seal fighting a Chamber holding something that turned the water to steam when it got close. The talisman wasn’t doing the man much good. Even without the water, Wassa was dangerous.

That look was enough to let three of the Chamber regroup and come at him as one. A gunshot brought one down, then a second as surprise slowed the third and Paul punched him hard enough the muzzle broke.

He turned to face the buffalo stumping in his direction with Pierce trailing behind him.

“Do you have any idea what Aaron’s going to do to us if you get killed under my watch?” Joseph demanded, cutting off Paul’s thanks.

“Probably not give you a raise?”

“You were supposed to come right back after the kangaroo’s thing,” the buffalo growled, Paul’s attempt at humor rolling off his fur.

He looked at the wolf, who vehemently shook his head. Paul was on his own here. “I went where I was needed. You didn’t need me getting in the way of you and the professionals.”

“I’d have known where you were!”

“I’m in charge!” Paul yelled back. “I’ll fucking go help whoever I think need it!”

“I’m here to make sure you stay alive,” the buffalo said through clenched teeth, taking a step in Paul’s direction.

Paul closed the distance and snapped, “Then take that big gun in your hand and come shoot someone with me.”

They glared at each other.

“Just to be clear,” Pierce said. “But you mean for him to grab his actual gun, not his

cock, right? Because I don't think right now is—" the muzzle shut audibly under the twin glares. He raised his hands in defeat and Paul went back to glaring at the buffalo, but it was too late. The image was firmly planted in his mind.

"Well," the golden tiger said pensively, "you are pretty big."

Joseph sighed, and his shoulders sagged. "Civilians."

"Is the courting over?" Wassa asked and looked unimpressed at the two machine guns pointed at her.

"How did you get out?" Joseph demanded.

"Magic," the seal replied flatly.

Joseph opened his mouth, then closed it.

"She saved my life," Paul said. "For the time being, I trust her."

"Where's your firearm?" the wolf asked.

Paul sighed. "Don't remind me."

"Remind you of what?"

"That I can't keep hold of one in the middle of this fighting." He pointed to the remnant of the machine gun. "Or keep them in one piece."

Pierce took a step back, holding his machine gun to his chest protectively.

"Civilians," Joseph grumbled.

The wolf opened his mouth, then closed it, ears plastered to his head in embarrassment.

"How about we go that way?" Paul pointed toward the fighting they could hear in the distance. "There's going to be plenty of Chamber we can take out our frustrations on." He looked at the two of them. "I'll be happy to vent whatever frustration I have left once this is over on both of you."

Pierce cheered up.

"I thought you were different from them," Joseph commented.

"One. After everything we've shared at this point, you two have more than earned my friendship." He scanned the ground for a replacement firearm. "Two. I'm not an obsessive top. Your ass isn't the only stress relief I'll need."

Wassa interrupted Joseph's response by throwing her hands in the air and saying something that, while not one of them understood, did not sound complimentary. Then she stormed off in the direction of the fighting.

"What if she's on her way to stab out people in the back?" Pierce asked.

Joseph continued glaring at the tiger, then let out a huff. "Then we'd better follow her to make sure she doesn't get to. If that's okay with you, boss."

Paul smiled. "Couldn't have said it better."

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Paul couldn't make sense of the scene he walked into.

The Steel Link people were facing off against a large group of Chamber, who had Wassa behind them, before a small, ornate, cast iron gate just on the other side of the force field. He couldn't see Thomas or Denton among those standing or who had fallen.

Next to him, Wassa looked over the scene, too.

"Grant is passing himself—"

She silenced him with a raised hand. "I do not need explanations. But it means I can not take part in this fight if the subterfuge is to work."

"The plan was to get God Wolf to drop the forcefield so we could get a small force in." Paul ignored the buffalo's glares. At this point, this wasn't information she could leak to the other side. "But with the Chamber between them and the gate, I don't know how many of them will make it."

He looked around again. Thomas wouldn't abandon Grant, so he had to be somewhere within sight of the gate.

"I'm heading in to help," Paul said, snatching the hand out of Joseph's holster. "What? You have a machine gun." He looked at Wassa. "Anything you can do to help without revealing yourself will be appreciated."

"You're an idiot for trusting her," The buffalo said as the seal disappeared within the trees.

Paul racked the slide. "You'll find out once this is over, won't we?"

He headed for the fighting. Time to get the ball rolling and see if it was possible to get people to finally think some good of the Orrs.