

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.

It was my own fault.

I spent so long under the water, Marrows had the time to make the arrangements to pay for the room. He wouldn't even tell me what the total was, and I knew he was hoping it would piss me off enough for a repeat performance. The smugness basically dripped off him.

"What did Donal tell you?"

"Just where to meet him." He motioned to the houses ahead of us.

The neighborhood was old and not well maintained. The houses barely held together from the last coat of paint they received. If one of them was approved for habitation, I'd be surprised. Kids stopped playing in the front yards. Some semi-virtual thing by the way they were looking through their phones as they ran.

I so wanted to think about how this wasn't a thing back home, but I'd be lying to myself. As much as we wanted to give homes to everyone, we were just one family, one city. This was the kind of thing that needed state and federal level action.

The squirrel was sitting on the steps leading to what might have been a beautiful three-story home with gothic influence at one time. Now. It was a danger to anyone living there.

"I was expecting you yesterday," Donal said, "or did you not get my message then?"

Marrows grinned. "Something came up that had to be dealt with."

Donal looked between us and rolled his eyes. "You people need to learn to prioritize. There are more important things than sex."

"It's called worshipping," Tom corrected, and I rolled my eyes. What we did wasn't anything close to worshipping, even if He got his tithe out of it.

"What did you find?"

"I found you a survivor," the squirrel answered, standing.

"Wanna Be left one alive?"

"Now, that's questionable," Donal said. "He's breathing, but is that enough to qualify as being alive?" I followed him up the steps, with Tom taking up the rear.

The inside wasn't any more impressive than the outside, but I wasn't worried about any of this falling on my head anymore. Someone had reinforced the structure using whatever was available. It wasn't pretty, but it looked like it would hold.

Each room we passed had multiple beds, except for the kitchen, where food was being prepared by three women old enough to be great grandmothers. Donal led us to a room at the back. A room with only two beds. On one, the one under the window, a kid: a jaguar no more than fifteen sat, looking outside. Next to the other bed, another jaguar, his mother, sat in a chair, watching him worryingly. She glanced at us and immediately returned to watching him as if he might vanish at any moment.

Donal said something in Spanish and she answered. I got a few words, but not enough to work out the quick conversation.

"She says he hasn't moved all morning," Donal said, "so you shouldn't expect too much. On days when he doesn't move, he's even less communicative."

"Can I approach him?" I asked.

Donal relayed my question, and she shrugged.

I moved closer, and the kid didn't react. He didn't even twitch when I entered his peripheral vision. His eyes fixed outside; on the street as if he was waiting for something.

"Does he understand English?" I asked, not taking my eyes off him. His ears didn't twitch at the words.

"He learned it," Donal answered, "but these days, it's questionable if he understands anything."

"What happened?"

"When he was seven," Donal said, "he disappeared for four days. Along with maybe a dozen other kids around his age over maybe five months."

"No one did anything?" the question was perfunctory. I knew no one did anything. If the police had been involved, my people would have found out.

"The fathers and older boys looked for the missing kids, but they were never found."

"How was the kid found?" Tom asked.

"Enrique walked home."

I looked at the squirrel. "He walked home? As in, he escaped?"

"Escaped, was released. There's no way to know because Enrique isn't telling. Gloria says he talks on his better days, but never about those four days. She used to try to get him to say anything, but it just shuts him down, so she stopped. Now, when he does talk, it's about characters on shows he used to watch. Nothing after that time."

"Like time stopped for him then," Tom said. "Can that kind of trauma cause something like that?"

"I'm not the right person to ask," Donal answered and looked at me.

"I'm not either." I sat next to him and watched, trying to get a read on Enrique, get anything. If not for the breathing, I could be looking at a statue. "What is he looking at?"

"He's waiting," Donal answered.

"The devil," the mother said, her accent thick. "The devil did this to him. The devil will come back to finish his work." I couldn't tell if it was fear or hope that accompanied the words. She simply wanted this to end, one way or another.

I looked at him again, sitting there, waiting for his abuser to come back. "Why do you think Wanna Be is who took him?"

"The age's right," Tom said. "Multiple boys over a few months, then nothing. Sounds like who you're after."

"Look at his arm," Donal said.

I looked, and the hand was fine. Carefully I took it and immediately notice how the fur wasn't growing properly at the wrist, just under the sleeve. I pushed it up and saw the scars. My breath hitched, both at how many there are and the fact they weren't random. I didn't recognize any of the patterns, but they were patterns, of that I had no doubt.

"Is it just his arms?" I asked, reaching for the buttons of his shirt. His mother was up and Donal held her as she yelled at me in Spanish. I watched without moving.

"It isn't just his arms," the squirrel said once she calmed down. "It's everywhere except his face and his hands."

My gaze dropped at the implications.

"Yes, even there."

"How did the kid even survive that?" Tom asked in a mix of awe and disgust.

"Magic?" Donal asked.

"As far as we know, Wanna Be isn't from one of the factions," I said.

"It doesn't mean he isn't without access," Tom pointed out.

"Why go through this if he has access to magic?" I asked. I shook my head. "This feels like he's looking for something." Or someone. Fred said there were similarities, and no other factions scared bodies in this way.

"I'm not clean."

The voice was so faint I thought I imagined it, and then I realized it was accented and looked

at Enrique, who was looking at me.

“I’m not clean,” he repeated, despair in his voice. “He only takes the clean ones.”

I looked at his mother and the shock on her face told me she never heard that before.

“How are you not clean?” I asked gently.

“Can you make me clean?” he asked, hope filling his voice. “If I’m clean, he’ll come back and take me.”

Take? “Where? Where does he take them?”

“Make me clean,” he demanded, and I shook my head. Was the only reason Enrique was still alive because Wanna Be considered him unclean? What could have marked him as such?

His face didn’t so much fall as ceased to be. He was a breathing statue again and his head turned until he was looking outside.

“What was that about?” Tom asked.

I had a suspicion, but I couldn’t test it. Only one person I knew has a chance of being able to tell if I was right.

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“He’s magical,” Elder Brislow said, exiting the bedroom where Enrique was sleeping, his mother at his side.

“How is that possible?” Donal asked.

“Don’t ask me, being a champion didn’t come with the manual on how the whole thing works. I barely know the parts that deal with Him, and that’s not because I’m a champion. I called in Fred, he’ll ask around and try to find the time to come. If anyone knows what’s going on or someone who can figure it out, it’s him.”

“Good,” Marrows said, “it saves me the trouble of visiting him.”

“Okay, but it makes no sense,” I said, looking at the men in the room. “Wanna Be is after magic. He had Enrique in his hands and he let him go because he’s magic?”

“Was he able to tell that?” Donal asked.

“What else would qualify in this situation?” I replied

“Then is your main assumption correct?” the elder asked.

“If Wanna Be isn’t looking for magic, why all the attempts at sigils, or the marks?”

The cheetah shrugged. “I don’t know. All I do know is that if you have new evidence that contradicts your assumptions, those are what’s wrong. Something in what you think this Wanna Be is doing is wrong, and that will what explains this boy.”

“Can he be healed?” Donal asked.

“His body, yes. What was done to him isn’t magical, so that’s easy to fix. His mind, that’s different. I’ll reach out to people who know more about it than I do. He’s still in there, so there is a chance. I’ll make sure he has the best care available.”

“Lucky him,” Donal said bitterly.

“Donal?” the elder asked.

“Look, I’m happy you’re going to help him, okay? But look at what it took to get you to do anything. There are hundreds of families just in that neighborhood you aren’t doing anything for. Do they all have to get abducted by some magical terror before anyone will do something for them? You’re supposed to be a Champion, Denton. I don’t see you do much championing.”

“I’m not the world’s savior, Donal. I just barely saved my god from Damian, and there was a good deal of luck involved. I wish this was something that could be magicked away, but magic has limits. This is a social problem and I am doing what I can to help. You know that. Me, Martin, and more than half the wealthy families in Denver support most of the shelters not affiliated with the church.”

“I know!” the squirrel dropped in a chair as I stood. “I’m sorry. Seeing him, knowing how rough the winter was on those who weren’t lucky enough to have a bed in a shelter, a community to go to, or magic,” he snarled, looking at his hands.

I was out of the room. I wasn’t interested in the social discourse this was going to become. If I was going to spend time on that, I’d do that at home.

“Hey,” Eddy grabbed my arm and pulled me into him. “You look like you need a change.”

I grabbed his ass. “What I need,” I growled, “is for you to help me forget the last six months.”

He grinned. “I don’t know if my dad’s going to give me the kind of time off that would need.”

“Fuck your dad,” I snarled, undoing his tail trap.

He chuckled. “Stay here long enough, and you know that’s going to happen.”