

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.

The helicopter created a dust storm that blocked all reminders of where I was and what happened. For a few seconds, I indulged in the fantasy it never happened. Other than the mental scars, once more, there were no evidence on my body I'd been through the wringer only a few hours ago.

When I exited the cavern, after throwing Used to be Fiona against the dildo and watching her dissolve into nothingness too, I returned to my bike to grab my stuff and trek back to civilization, only to find that it, and my phone, worked again; so I called civilization to me.

People exited the helicopter before the blades stopped spinning.

"Secure the area," a powerful voice yelled over the sound. "Confirm there isn't anything more, but do not, I repeat, do not touch a fucking thing. If you do, after me and Wyatt have kicked your ass back into that prison you can be be damned sure I will find a way to get you out and fuck it for disobeying me, am I clear?"

The yeses that followed were as steady as my father's voice. They didn't react to the threat. They knew it was real, but they were professionals.

The dust finally fell as men in camo armor ran past me for the mouth of the cavern. Then it was only me and my father in his own set of camo.

I smiled. He looked good. Arnold Orr looked good in anything, or out of it.

He stopped before me. Studied me. Nodded. "Good job, son." And walked by to join the men inside the cavern.

I'll take being around him without us having a reason to argue any day of the year.

I followed him in to make sure none of the men screwed up, or, if they did, remind them what happened when there was an Orr there to see you do it.

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Dad didn't stay any longer than it took for the team to secure the giant stone dildo for transport. That was to say we were in each other's company for eight hours too long.

He demanded I leave once I'd explained everything that happened. I refused. I came across this; I had the right to make sure it was taken away. I didn't have the training to deal with these kinds of things, he replied. I laughed in his face. Not my smartest move. But who did have the training to box a magical prison? Unless my dad had managed to hide a big part of his life from the rest of us. Not him.

After that we did our best to stay out of each other's fur.

We got a breather when I talked with the helicopter pilot, who had nothing to do until the prison it ready. I convinced him to take me up so I could survey the area in the hope the church I was looking for would be easier to find from the air.

It wasn't, but we did find the remnant of a town, a hundred miles west of where Beth had me start from. If that was where I need to be, I'd have to discuss her accuracy.

We flew back to the site, I paid the pilot, and we were both quite pleased with that time. Then I went to see if I could help again.

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"Are you sure you don't want to fly back with us?" dad asked. "We can strap your bike

to the case, and the helicopter is spacious enough there's going to be people between the two of us."

The case was the wooden box that was constructed around the prison, reinforced with metal and magic. Turned out dad brought an expert. Turned out there were experts at retrieving things like this, but instead of shoving my mocking down my throat with it, he let me laugh at him.

I'd hug him for it, but he'd punch me.

Dad's punches hurt.

"One," I replied, "Adam is going to kill you if you dangle my bike under a helicopter."

"He's going to try," my dad replied. "I haven't fucked him for a while, so it would be worth the inconvenience of him trying."

"I'd like to keep all my fathers as far from each other as being family allows. So I'm going to pass. I also need to check out something related to what caused me to run across this place."

"Which is?"

I shook my head. "I don't even know that it's related." I was not telling my dad his uncle, the now god who tried to steal power from our god and threatened to make me and my brothers his slave in the process, might be back among us. My dad, more than anyone in my family, tended to be apocalyptically irrational when it came to Damian.

"You know how I feel about you keeping things from me."

"I'm not a kid anymore, dad. And you want me to keep stuff from you. You go all icky when I start talking about my emotions."

"I do not go icky," he snarled, taking step forward. "And that stuff is gross. Being Horny and pissed off are the only two emotions an Orr needs."

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you trying to be funny?"

He crossed his arms. "There's no trying about it."

I laughed. "Blessed Cum, you tried for a dad joke." I snorted. "Missed by a few hundred miles. But you actually tried!"

"You tell anyone about this and I will fuck you."

"I promise, I will keep this moment for myself and cherish it always."

"You're an asshole, you know that."

I grinned. "I am you son."

The quirk of his lips was barely noticeable. "That you are. You be careful with whatever this is. Word is that you were in Denver, so if this related to that, it isn't going to be good."

"Dad." I closed my mouth as the whine in my voice registered. I'm a fucking Orr, I don't whine. My dad's smirk wasn't helping.

"You know how I feel about that kid."

"I'm not going to marry him. Fuck dad. Me and Eddy are friends. You're friend with is dad; why is this such a problem for you?"

"Because that family is a bad influence on us. Yes, I'm friends with him, and look what happened."

"We are finally accepted within the Society? People actually come to us when they're in trouble instead of going to idiots who have no idea what they're doing?"

"I'm in fucking charge of this family!" my dad glared with the best of them, better even, but I grew up with them; it lost their effect over the years. "It's his fault, him and his ideas I should make friends, and try to understand my brothers. We were supposed to rotate leadership. But no, first Aaron decides he doesn't actually want to run this family after what happened in Nevada, then Aiden is too busy managing the band, who the fucks wants Anakin to run anything after he used his year to throw an anime party throughout the city. I swear, that brother of mine is a child!"

Dad's ranting didn't even slow as he went through the others. Of course, he never

mentioned that he'd always been the one who swooped in to fix the mistakes. That his times in charge were to most peaceful the city saw. He blamed Elder Brislow, but the truth was that my dad needed to take care of us. He needed to make sure we were doing okay. He just couldn't be seemed to like doing that. So he bitched about how he never wanted this, or that, or how his arm was twisted—like anyone will ever buy that excuse—or he was conned into running the family full time.

I think that if my dad admitted he liked the job, he'd explode.

"I won't let Eddy make me the next guy to run the family," I reassured him.

"No, he'd going to turn you into some sort of do gooder," my dad grumbled.

"No more than I have to be to keep our ties to the other factions intact."

He let out a breath. "You better. I don't want to hear about you helping people out without proper payment."

"You won't, don't worry." I smiled at the glare he gave me. He was trying to work out if I mean I won't do it, or I'll make sure news of it never reached him. He knew me well enough to know I was good for either.

He shook his head. "The band's in the city in three month, be there for the concert."

"I'll—" this time the glare shut me up.

"Be there. We're a family, we're going to act like one at least once this decade." He turned and headed to the helicopter.

He was insane.

That was the only reason for him to say that. He wanted everyone in San Francisco at the same time? My dad had been fucked out of his mind. There wasn't going to be a city left after that concert if everyone was there.