

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 to 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 button didn't have a number on it, and the panel stretched to accommodate it. Was that what I had subconsciously registered?

The door opened on a well-lit floor that recalled the labs I'd seen, by way of a slaughterhouse. I stepped off before the doors closed and turn to confirm the door was still there.

This was clearly magic, but a type I've never seen. I was either squeezed between two floors out there in reality, or I had been moved to a different location. It had better be the first one, the second was too close to teleportation for my liking. It's one thing for someone to do it. But for the magic to be harnessed and used to create a gateway? That's terrifying. Changing the inside volume of a container I've seen done, although not on this scale.

The labs were delineated by a script on the floor instead of walls. I didn't recognize it, but it brought to mind equations, which gave me a sense of who I might be dealing with. It would also match the scientific methodology the work made me think of.

We, in the magical community, tend to be grouped under all-encompassing banners. The Society is sex magic for men. The Convent is the same for women. The Ten Knives are thieves. The Green man's followers only care about nature. Sahataan was about killing for power.

Like any generalizations, they're wrong in that it isn't all that we are. The Society comprises businessmen, artists, criminals. Sex powers us, but overall, it doesn't define us. Same with the others.

One such group that has had to deal with their own generalization is the Thinkers. Because of how they think, hence the name, they come across as odd. They can think their way around reality, so that makes for weird people. And with oddness is associated madness.

The Mad Scientist.

It's not true that all Thinkers are mad. They're not even all that weird. But if I'm right, there is definitely one mad scientist in the bunch, more than one, if those dissecting the bodies are doing in of their own volition.

Every faction has their bad guys. Some are well known, like Damian, the Chamber, or the Stokers, others don't do anything big enough to register beyond their immediate surroundings. The magical community is no different from any other community, except maybe in the reach the consequences can have when the bad examples let loose.

New York City anyone?

The workers didn't acknowledge me, which made me think their will weren't their own. They were robots, performing specific tasks. Unless I intervened in that, I doubted they'd react to me. This meant that if I could find the person running the place, I could shut them all down at once.

With almost anyone else, I'd be looking for the 'office'. The throne room. The place they could bask in the glory of what was being accomplished for them. Fiction doesn't have a monopoly on maniacal madmen or women. The thing with Thinkers was that they didn't really care about glory. It was all about solving the problem. Whatever that might be, and here I had no idea what might require cutting apart people.

It also meant that instead of a throne room or the like, I was looking for someone working in one of the labs. One of the twenty or thirty labs, all of which were occupied by someone cutting up a body. How was I going to tell the Thinker apart out of—

Hold on. Not all of them were cutting up bodies.

The man behind the table over which magical screens were floating was a tall and thin ermine, or another of the slim mustelids. Charcoal fur with white lines coming out of his collar and merging into the white of his headfur.

I considered running and punching him out. I didn't usually care for that, but there were twenty-plus bodies on tables who were murdered at this man's orders. The problem with that was that I had no idea what safety he had in place. We know what magic can do, so we tend to protect ourselves appropriately.

And while I didn't expect it would happen, resolving this peacefully would be nice.

I tested the 'wall' marked by the equation on the floor and found it insubstantial, so I stepped into his lab. Only then did his focus shift from the screens to me. Visible through them.

"Who are you?" he asked, sounding confused. He looked around. "How did you get in?"

Questions gave me hope we could talk this out. "The elevator."

"That's impossible," he scoffed. "The compulsion in it keeps you from seeing the floor."

That would explain the headache. My family can force guys to want sex. Using that on each other is part of growing up. We develop resistance to compulsions as a way to survive. For this to have affected me means it's strong. But it also means we've moved away from bending space to putting an illusion over the building. Still impressive, but on a level I'm more comfortable accepting.

"Well, here I am, and you, more than anyone else, should know impossible isn't as final as the mundanes once thought it was." Yeah, mundane isn't the politically correct term. But it's just the two of us, so who cares.

"You know me?" the question came with a level of pride, and whatever meter I had running in my head, ticking toward 'mad as a hatter' ticks up.

"No, just that you're a Thinker and that you've been kidnapping the homeless for whatever this is." I motioned around us.

"I haven't kidnapped anyone. I offered them a meal in exchange for helping me advance knowledge. I did feed them. Better than they had in a long time, I suspect."

"And did you tell them that help came in the form of being killed and dissected?"

He looked at me, confused, and the meter ticks again.

"Oh, you mean this?" he motioned, beaming. "This is temporary. I have all the parts. I'll put them back together once I've found my answer. They'll be as good as new."

I put my hands on the table and glared at him. "You can't bring the dead back to life," I stated.

"Yet," he added proudly. "I'm getting close."

I shook my head. "The gods are the only ones with the power of life over death."

"That's a fallacy. Just because we haven't managed to do something doesn't mean we can't. How long did the non-magical throw themselves off cliffs in an attempt to fly before one of them figured out they needed to do it in a machine? Just because they couldn't fly for millennia didn't mean they couldn't do it at all." The look he gave me was that of a teacher, having explained a basic subject to his student. The read I got off him was compassion.

Another tick up.

He believed he was doing something good. He didn't see the killing as wrong, because in his mind it wasn't final. "Where are you keeping their soul?"

Confusion filled his face. "Soul? That's not a thing."

"When you die, your god claims you."

"But I'm not like them. I was picked by my god, infused with his power. They're... well, not that."

"What makes them people, then? They existed before the gods started claiming some of them as their own."

He shook his head. "No, that's not how it works. They're not like me. They're... like my automatons, going through the motion of what life is. Their purpose is to make more of themselves so the gods can find someone worthy of being picked." He smiled. "Like me."

Each god is different in how they pick their followers. Some are bloodline. Some have to earn it, some are just picked. I wish the one thing they could all agree on was to only take the sane

ones. There would be no reasoning with this one. I reached for him and my hand passed through the neck.

He smiled. “Did you really think I’d stand here and wait for you to make your move?” the illusion said.

The impact came from behind me and sent me flying over the table and through two others, breaking them and spilling body parts over the floor. Heat on my back, the smell of burned fur as I stood.

The ermine stared at me. “How are you still alive?”

I straightened. “My name is Wyatt Orr.”

“Am I supposed to know you?” he asked.

I sighed. Of all the times for someone not to know my family. I rushed him and almost connected. My speed surprised him, but the formulas deflected the punch, and then my momentum nearly sent me off balance. A few dance steps and I was steady. In time to jump out of the way of the beam. Focused light? Concentrated fire? There were too many possibilities as to what it could be, and unlike with the Society, this wasn’t an innate ability. This was the closest thing to what mundanes think of as spellcraft. He was bending reality to his will using formulas the way we use sigils and *phrases*.

Unfortunately, I’m not exactly the write on-the-fly kind of guy.

I dodged another beam, which took out three labs, and rushed the Thinker. This time I saw the equations form, grabbed a table, and threw it at him. It shattered on the protection, but as I’d hoped, it disrupted it enough that my fist made it through in its wake. There was little strength to it by the time it connected with the man’s face, only enough to stagger him back, but his concentration was broken, so my next one would take his head off his body.

Or not.

He turned, and in a flutter of lab coat, vanished. I cursed. Thinkers can also write stuff down, and this one prepared a last defense.

For a moment I felt the defeat weight on me. He could be anywhere, and he’d just start this up again. Now I had two deranged killers to—

He couldn’t teleport.

Fuck, I’d almost let him escape. The were illusions. That was his thing, or at least what was easy for him. I looked around and couldn’t see him, but I did see the one way out. The elevator. I ran for it, pushed myself as hard as I could. If he reached it before me, then it was over. I slowed only enough that I was going to collide with the metal door and not run through it. Only I ran through it, and into the car, impacting the back wall, smoother than I expected. The ermine crumpled to the floor as the door closed.

I looked at his unconscious body, disappointed I wouldn’t get to give him a solid pounding. I still could, but it felt wrong to kick an unconscious man, no matter how many people he’d killed. I put him over my shoulder and pressed the button for the fourth floor.

I got stared at as I walked down the hall and I interrupted an argument between Wrong and Marrows when I entered the office. The badger looked relieved.

“What took you so long?” he asked.

“What did you do to him?” she demanded.

I held him up before her. “Is he one of yours?” I asked. I figured the company was small enough she know all the employees. If he did work here, it changed a lot of things. It’s one thing for one of us to go nuts. It’s another for mundanes to employ us to commit their atrocities.

She studied him. Approached and carefully looked him over. “No, he isn’t. What happened?” she sniffed the air and I’m reminded of my burned back. I believed her.

“He’s a Thinker. He hid one of the building’s floors from everyone and was using it to conduct experiments, killing homeless people to do them.”

Marrows whistled and took out his phone. “We’ve just crossed into FBI territories.”

I groaned. Not only is Denver where my god’s champion resides. It’s also the headquarter of the FBI’s magical enforcement division. Second-home of assistant director Zikabar Malhotra Bodenman.

“I am so fucked,” I said as the badger grinned and started talking.