

Chapter 19

With a yelp that sounded too scared to come from his best friend, Thomas vanished.

The cheetah stared at where the rat had been. "That answers that, for one of you at least." He looked at the seal. "Ma'am, I'd appreciate it if you let me in."

"Don't!" Grant blurted out as Wassa stepped out of the way.

The cheetah stepped in, immediately followed by a bear, a wolf, and a raccoon wearing gray and black body armor. They methodically surveyed the room and those in it.

"I told you to stay outside," the cheetah said in exasperation.

"Sorry, sir," The bear replied. "Mister Marrows was quite descriptive in what he'd do to us if we let you go into this alone."

"Fine," The cheetah said through gritted teeth, "you stay. You two, out. We don't need to scare them anymore than they already are."

Paul looked at the others. Like him, they looked more worried than scared, except for Wassa. She was eying the cheetah with curiosity.

When neither the raccoon nor wolf moved, the cheetah eyed them. "Do you really want me to remove you myself? Alan is here; I'm not alone. Tom's over-protectiveness is dealt with. Out!"

They left reluctantly, and the bear closed the door.

"Now," the cheetah said, facing Paul and the others. "My name is Denton Brislow. While I don't know you individually, I've gathered the basics. Except for you, Ma'am. I know you're part of the magical community, since He's shown me some of the things you did before arriving in Denver, but I couldn't unearth anything more."

"It might be because Wassa was on ice for some years," Paul offered.

"Centuries," Grant added, reluctantly.

"Right," the cheetah said, sounding annoyed more than surprised. "With that covered, I still want to know what He's seen fit to pester my nights with the lot of you."

"I may be able to enlighten you," Wassa said.

"I would appreciate it," Denton said, then looked around. "Do you mind if I make space for us to sit?"

"Shit." Donal moved for the container on the couch. "I never considered having people over." The one he reached for lifted off the couch on its own, along as with the others there. The squirrel looked at Grant, who was staring at the cheetah.

"My way's faster," Denton said as Donal looked to Wassa. Boxes and piles of items moved off chairs and deposited themselves in free spots on the floor. "You," he told the bear, "are staying by the door. The price for not doing what your boss tells you."

"Sounded like his boss is this Mister Marrows," Paul said, taking a seat.

"No. He's just the guy who doesn't think I can survive five minutes without him watching my ass. He's needed out of the country right now, so he'd making my life hell by proxy." He let out a breath as he dropped into a love seat. "Wassa, if you'd be so kind?"

The seal sat on the other end of the couch Grant sat on. "I must go back in time to explain properly. But first, do you know of the Practitioners and the Chambers?"

"I've heard the names; got a rundown of who they are, but I've yet to encounter anyone from that faction."

"We're not—" grant closed his mouth. The cheetah waited, then nodded to Wassa.

"This story begins before there were the Practitioners or the Chamber. It was only those of us who channeled the creativity of the world. We made magic by making items and imbuing them with meaning. Grant tells me those are now called talismans." She tapped the phone at her neck. "This is such. A talisman around the idea of communicating."

"In time, it was discovered that some of us made talisman so strong that it, and its power remained once the crafter died. More so, the talisman would draw someone with a similar aptitude to itself. Those became known as our staves."

Donal froze when the cheetah looked at him, his hand nearly to a pocket, then resumed the motion and pulled out his staff.

"Out of fear of what the uninitiated might do with such powerful items, caretakers were assigned to look after them and educate whoever a staff drew to itself. They would come to be called the Chamber."

Grant's head snapped away from watching Denton to Wassa, giving her his full attention.

"There were ups and downs. Arguments and alliances. We are like everyone else; prone to our opinions and the desires to see them adopted by others. One such opinion was that the gods who bestowed magic on those who followed them did so by stealing from the creativity of the word."

The cheetah tilted an ear, but remained silent.

"Then, the Chamber decided this blasphemy could not be allowed to continue. They needed to put an end to this theft once and for all. They devised a plan by which they would use the strength of all staves, gathered or still in use, to create a ceremony that would destroy all those thieves and return that creativity where it belonged."

The cheetah chuckled. "I'm sorry, but really? Make some magic to kill all the gods except yours, and that'll somehow return their power to it?"

"That isn't how it works for us," Grant said with an exasperated sigh. He raised a hand to forestall the protest. "I get it. You follow a god, so do the people in the other factions. Do you really think absolutely everyone out there has to operate under that one principle?"

The cheetah mulled that over. "Alright. I'll grant you that I don't happen to know everything about everything, so I'm not in a position to claim you're wrong. But that the power of all the gods comes from..." He gestured around them.

"The universe?" Grant finished. "No, we don't believe that." When Wassa didn't voice her agreement, he stared at her.

"I do not believe," she said cautiously, "that my belief as to where the gods get their power is relevant to this story. I will say that by the time I became involved, the purpose of the ceremony was no longer to simply return that power to the world, the universe, as you say. After all, without a mind guiding, protecting that power, what would stop others from stealing it again and making themselves gods? It was decided by the Chamber that one of their own would become that mind and hold that power."

"Making themselves a god," Denton said flatly.

"It sounded as arrogant to many of us as it does to you," Wassa said. "And when the Chamber was no longer content with convincing us their goals were good, or at least for the greater good, they took our staves by force."

She fell silent, and Paul realized it was possible her dress wasn't her staff. Grant no longer had one; he'd sacrificed it to save Thomas and his friends. Maybe she'd lost hers when the Chamber took it.

"They won," she whispered, then raised her head. "How could they not? By then, for each of us with a staff, there were dozens of them charged with looking after the staves of the fallen. Once they had all of them, they attempted their ceremony."

"And they failed," Paul said in the silence. "Obviously."

"Catastrophically," she added. "The volcano by which they did it erupted, sending dark clouds across the sky that would not dissipate."

"That happened in Iceland?" Grant asked, thoughtfully.

"It was. For months, the skies were black. Anywhere I traveled to, the weather was cold. People starved."

"You're talking about the dark ages," the cheetah said.

"The time was dark, yes."

"Almost two years of ash in the sky," Grant said. "There's heavy debates as to which volcanic eruption caused it. The strongest theories point to a combination of them, instead of only one. They're confident one erupted in Iceland. Could what the chamber did set off other volcanoes around the planet?"

"I do not know," she said, aghast. "They were attempting to destroy gods. The ideas needed to do such a thing should be unthinkable."

"The concept of destruction on that level could have blown the world apart," Donal said with a shudder. "If all we got were two volcanoes, even four, we can count ourselves lucky."

"Or the gods stepped in," the cheetah said thoughtfully.

"They don't get involved," Grant said dismissively, and the cheetah chuckled. "You said you traveled, Wassa. I thought that it's what the chamber did that resulted in you bring trapped where we found you."

She shook her head. "I...survived. I was changed. I do not understand how it happened. When the staves were rendered in the ceremony, most died. Their destruction ripped something out of them. But for a few of us..." she shook herself. "The dark age was still ongoing when the surviving Chamber analyzed what happened; why it went wrong. They decided the mistake had been that they lacked the proper number of staves. I do now know how many they believe they needed, but it was enough they decided they could not wait for staves to come about naturally. They began cultivating Practitioners for the sole purpose of creating more staves and then to have them die, freeing the staff."

"For them to use," Grant said darkly, and she stared at him, eyes wide in surprise.

Hadn't she seen them? No, Paul realized. There hadn't been any staves used in the fight. The vole had his, but the fighting had been over by then, and the way Thomas talked about it, once Wassa was involved thing happened quickly enough she might not have noticed there was a staff present.

"You said you weren't the only one who survived," the cheetah said. "What happened to the others?"

"I do not know. The few who, like me, sought to keep the Chamber from attempting this again went their own way after our last failure to keep them from harvesting Practitioners. They may have tried again, but I no longer had the energy for defeat. I sought a different way. I scried the future for what to do."

"You can do precognition?" the cheetah asked, surprised.

"Knowledge is an idea, a concept. It does not limit itself to what has happened in the past. It led me to retrieve the tool required to ensure the Chamber would be stopped, and then where to slumber, so the one to stop them would find me and I would hand him the tool so he could ready himself for the coming battle."

She cleared the coffee table, shoving the items on it to the ground, then covered it with the sleeve of her gown. When she raised her arm, there was something on the table.

"Holy fuck!" Grant was up, backing away.

Paul looked at the broken sword. The pieces were arranged as they should be, but there were a good dozen of them. Only the hilt was intact.

Denton stood and took a careful step back. "What is that?"

"Tell me that isn't what I think it is," Grant demanded of Wassa, who looked at him in confusion.

"What is it?" Donal asked.

"That." Grant pointed at the sword. "Is fucking Excalibur."