

Chapter 13

“Fuck,” Paul grumbled as he became conscious. He tried to push the person shaking him away and massage his temple with his other hand. This felt like that morning after the party where he’d discovered alcohol.

“Wake up,” a woman snapped, “we’ve got to talk.”

He forced an eye open and closed it on seeing the pangolin glaring at him. So much for these last few days being a drunken hallucination.

“Let him rest, Shila,” Donal said.

“I’m awake.” Paul didn’t think Shila would let him go back to sleep. And if he remembered what had happened, they couldn’t afford that delay.

He sat, and the phone on his chest slid off, which he caught before it ended up on the floor. There was a heart-beat line, except in multiple colors, for a second, then the screen went blank. Stripes of fabrics with faded bright red fire engines and yellow airplanes were wrapped around his arms, chest and head.

He wasn’t in pain, so those and the phone had to be the reason... not that he understood how stripes of children’s blankets could accomplish that. Practitioner magic was more about concept than the exact items used. He looked at the squirrel and tilted an ear, since those were clearly his work.

“They’re from a children’s hospital that closed down a few years ago,” Donal answered. “They should have been packed and donated to people in need, but they were misplaced. I came across them when I was badly hurt. They’ve served me well since.”

A hospital would account for the healing.

“How are you, we, still alive?” Paul asked. “Or free, for that matter. I don’t know what the Chamber’s plans were once we were captured.”

“You dealt with the bruiser,” Shila stated, eyes locked on him.

Paul raised a hand to keep whatever else she had to say about it from being said. “Nina sent me flying, and I was knocked unconscious when I hit the wall.”

“Oh, you went flying alright,” Donal said. His chuckle earned him the glare Shila had been giving Paul. “But there was chimpanzee between you and that wall. Your head hit his face, and you were both out.”

Paul looked around at the room. The discolored and peeling wallpaper, along with strong smell of mildew—he looked at the mattress he was on, worrying that was where it came from, but that was in good condition—made it clear this wasn’t in the hotel.

“How did we get...wherever this is?”

“I carried you,” Donal replied, and Paul looked the man over curiously. “Yes, I used magic. We’re in an abandoned apartment building three blocks away from the hotel. It was the closest place I was certain the Chamber wouldn’t find us, once those unconscious muscles woke up to tell their boss we escaped with two of their staves.”

They were the items on the dresser that looked too flimsy to support their weights. The microscope and brass knuckle staves. “Nina?”

“The bitch ran,” Shila said. “If I find her, I’m going to rip her head off for what she did to Merlin.”

“Do we know she did anything?” Paul raised a hand to silence Shila. “I’m not defending her, but wouldn’t this sickness be enough to push him to overuse his staff?”

“This sickness the Chamber made happen to target him,” Shila said.

“The Chamber always makes sure they have someone ready to wield the Practitioner’s staff they are targeting there before they start,” Donal said. “She was probably Merlin’s nurse, like she claimed.” Shila snorted. “But even if she didn’t set all this up, she was definitely complicit in it. And I won’t be surprised if it

was her idea to pass the staff around the others in the clinic. They didn't have the training to know the difference between their need to work harder to help others and the magic pushing them toward Apotheosis. [not quite sure if this version work as well as yours] The fact she came to my house tells me that she was done with the clinic and the Chamber had a plan for me. Which you sidetracked."

Paul sighed. "So, can we tell people about her and let them deal with it, or do we have—"

"You get to explain why you held out on me," Shila spat.

Paul stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Paul," Donal said calmly, and was glared at again by Shila, who looked ready to rip Paul a new one. "Nina didn't attack you."

"I have the bump to the back—" He paused halfway to touching the not painful spot there. "I have the blackout proving you wrong."

"That was the staff defending itself," the squirrel said, running a finger along an assembly of objects a little longer than his hand. "Unclaimed staves only let Practitioners or Chamber hold them. And since the Chamber never claims their staves, what you experienced was more of an automated defense than anything Nina could have produced from a medically aspected staff."

"So, Who are you with?" Shila demanded. "And why the fuck didn't you tell me? Do you have any idea what I could have done with more magic on hand?"

"I don't do magic," Paul finally said after looking from one to the others trying to make sense of what they were talking about.

"That's what I was afraid of," Donal said with a defeated sigh.

"That's bullshit! You're a Knife, aren't you? You and your fucking secrecy."

"He's not a knife, Shila. That, I'd know."

"Oh, really? You'd be able to see through the masters of misdirection? You planning on selling me the Golden Gate bridge next?"

"Don't be an idiot. From what Grant told me, nothing can find them if they don't want to be. But maybe you missed that detail, with you helping from the safety of your apartment in California, but Paul was a victim of Henry Stoker. I was the one who restored his and everyone else's memories. Paul was the simplest case, and something like a history with the Knives would have stood out even if I knew nothing about them at that point. Not to say what Stoker would have had someone like that do for him, instead of just keeping him around as a toy and hostage."

"Fine," she snapped. "He joined after."

"You know more about them than I do, Shila. Explain to me how a biotech graduate fits the mold of a Knife."

"Then he joined one of the other factions! He's Thinker, or some such, and he's keeping it to himself instead of using that to help me."

"I don't do magic," Paul stated in as calm of a tone as he could.

"You do," Donal replied. "You might not know how, but you can. Otherwise, you'd have taken the staff out of Nina's hands."

"But... I know if I was magic, wouldn't I?"

"We are not doing this again!" Shila yelled.

"I swear, Shila. If I was holding out on you before, I'd tell you now. But how can I be? There are no tiger Survivors, and the Society route is way too convoluted to do by accident when you know how it goes."

Donal sighed and looked at the pangolin. "That leaves you and me."

Shila glared at him as she stumped in a circle until she slowed and her shoulders slumped. "You aren't like us," she told Paul. "You'd have a staff if you were, and you would have been able to take Merlin's staff. But... gods are sneaky. You have to consent, but that doesn't mean one of them has to appear before you and get you to say yes. If you're primed, just agreeing to the act that god represents can be enough. That's why Thomas was initiated, but his brother wasn't, no matter how often he was forced to undergo their ceremony."

"But Thomas didn't agree to join them. He didn't even know the Society existed."

She dropped into a chair and Paul winced, expecting it to shatter. "That's what I mean by the gods being sneaky. You don't have to know what you're consenting to. Thomas and Neil were primed. They agreed to have sex in a way that to their god said yes without any uncertainty, and they were part of them. That structure every faction builds around how their magic works and how you get it. That people's creation, not the gods. The gods don't need to follow their faction's procedures if they want to form the bond with someone. There's even stories of a faction out there that has no way to initiate a follower. That they've for to run around looking for anyone their god decided was part of them."

"You're talking about Ashimir," Donal said.

“And you’re saying I’m one of them?” Paul asked.

The squirrel shook his head. “You don’t fit the little I’ve worked out about them.” He paused. “I’d been helping this lost soul at a shelter, and there was something about her. I thought maybe she was like me and Shila.” He raised a hand. “I was just assimilating everything Grant had told me. Now I know better. But yeah, I thought I could guide her so she wouldn’t stumble the way I did. And then her therapist had words with me. She was being chosen by Ashimir, who is the god of knowledge and survival, but she needed to arrive to that understanding unaided. I didn’t ask anymore question, but the next time I came across someone I got the same vibe from, I contacted that therapist who confirmed he was indeed another of Ashimir’s chosen.”

“You can tell who follows that god?” Shila asked in disbelief.

“No, it’s in how they behave.” Paul smiled. “Think of how the Society will fuck a guy at the smallest excuse, but they have a different set of behavior, which you aren’t exhibiting, Paul. But that doesn’t mean one of the other gods hasn’t chosen you.” [hopefully, this reworking still works]

“Okay,” Paul said hesitantly, “but if I don’t know what faction I’m with, I’m basically a normal guy, right?”

“No,” Shila said through clenched teeth. “A normal guy could have picked up that staff.” She gestured to the staves. “And put an end to this fucking thing.” She took out her phone, muttering to herself.

“So I’m out of the running for holding the staff. Denver must have a medical university. How about going to a hospital? There’ll be some doctor there who can do it.”

“Hospital doctors are going to be too busy to listen to us talk about magical cures, and I’m worried that even with me and Shi—well, with me trying to keep them grounded, they’d give into the desire to fix everything at once and... I’m not going to do what the Chamber does. As for medical students. Those with the skills that would help will be out there helping. Those who don’t have the skills will...” he chuckled. “Probably still be out there helping.”

Paul nodded. He might not always have the best opinion of people as a whole, but it took a certain personality to make it through the gruesome years of medical studies. Those who stuck with it could be described as the type who ran toward danger, instead of away.

“Then how about you?” Paul asked. “Wouldn’t what you do let you find the right candidate for the staff?”

“I don’t find stuff,” Donal said, turning his staff in his hand, “or people, Paul. I find what’s lost or hidden. I mean, I could make a talisman, and it might guide me to someone, but that’s no more reliable than any other predictive magic. It’s the rare person who had a reliable precognitive ability.” He chuckled. “And even those aren’t immune to getting it wrong sometimes.”

“So, we’re fu—”

“No, no, no, no.”

Paul was on his feet and had Shila by the shoulders. “What’s wrong?” She stared at her phone, but whatever was there was masked from his sight somehow.

When she looked up, fear filled her eyes. She did something to the screen, and a voice came from the phone.

“No one knows how carrier made it so deep outside the quarantine zone, John,” a mana said, “But Castle Rock, Strasburg, as well as Fort Collins are now reporting cases of infection and a rapid spread of this sickness. Just ten minutes ago, half a dozen of the National Guards fell sick, and I’ve heard reports of the CDC locking their doors because doctors inside the labs have fallen sick, too.”

“Are we looking at a case of viral samples being released into the population, Marcel?”

The reporter laughed bitterly. “How would I know? We’re dealing with chaos here. And there’s no one there to give us answers. The way things are going, there’s not going to be anyone in charge to keep this from getting...”

“Marcel, are you there? What can you—”

“I have to go.”

“Marcel, you—”

“I have to call my wife.” There was the click of the call terminating.

“Well,” the announcer said, sounding put off. “We will get in contact with Marcel as soon as we can and provide you with more information on this developing situation. Until then, let’s go to Johanna, with the highlights from last night’s football game.”

“Is Nina doing this?” Paul asked, remembering the glee in her eyes as she inflicted pain on him. He could see her lashing out like this. He should have realized what he’s observed of her in the street wasn’t empathy exhaustion. It was a total lack of it.

“There’s no fucking way that bitch has the power needed to pull that off,” Shila snarled. “She’s just

Chamber.”

“But she knows the sickness,” Donal said. “Probably better than the doctors, or even that rhino. She was on the front line with Merlin.”

“Can this be the natural progression of this sickness?” Paul asked. “I mean, what if it wasn’t the staff pushing the virus forward, but holding it back to the level the Chamber needed it to be?”

“I don’t know.” Donal shrugged. “My interactions with the Chamber have been minimal. But Grant bitches they’re always taking on more than they can handle.”

Shila snorted. “Maybe if he stopped cleaning up their messes, they’d wipe themselves out.”

“And how many innocents along the way?” Donal countered.

“Okay. I know someone in the medical field would be ideal, but at this point, can’t we just hand the staff over to anyone and tell them what to do? I don’t think we can be picky anymore.”

“That’s isn’t who this work, Paul. We don’t need to be primed the way you do, but there’s still a need for some attunement. If we can find someone with some level of medical knowledge, it’ll increase the chances the staff with work for them, but we can’t find someone like that with just some precognitive talisman. We need some sort of algorithm based one, to sort through anyone in the area who’ll fit. Shila can you—”

Shila was on the other side of the room. Paul had noticed her standing and walking outside of field of view, but he’d been too focused on figuring out a solution to keep track of her. She was mumbling something about viruses and anti-virals while her fingers flew over her phone’s screen. Among other medical-sounding words, he heard some that sounded like programing ones.

He jerked forward as she let go of her phone, but Donal caught his arm. The phone floated before her, light dancing from it to Shila’s moving fingers, leaving behind what looked like strings of code he couldn’t quite make out.

“Donal,” Paul whispered, not wanting to distract Shila, “what’s going on?”

The squirrel didn’t answer. He watched her in silence for a few seconds, and when he spoke, his voice caught.

“Shi—Shila. Are you sure now is the time?”

Her fingers kept moving, leaving more lines to trail after them, but Paul had the sense the question made her pause. When she looked at them and spoke, there was none of the snarkiness he’d come to expect from the pangolin. Her tone was calm, almost serene.

“Are you saying that after you told me I needed to care about what was happening, now is when I have to stop? Yes, Donal. Now is the time. Get the staves to Grant. He’ll know how to best deal with them.” She started to turn back to her phone and paused, focusing on the squirrel. “Oh and Donal, for fuck sake, eat something. You aren’t broke and living off the street anymore.”

“Shila?” Paul called, but she was looking at her phone. She stood there before him, but she also was no longer there. She was lost in what she was doing. The stings of code weren’t lines anymore. They moved and formed patterns he didn’t understand, wasn’t sure he should even try to understand. Somehow, he knew that what he was looking at wasn’t something the phone, or even reality as he knew it, was capable of producing.

He wanted to reach for her, but Donal still held his arm.

Motes of lights jumped from the phone and the... whatever that was, to her fingers, spread over her hands, becoming brighter, while also not being bright at all. As if it was light, and whatever the conceptual opposite of light might be, but not darkness. There was something within the light, details. Other lights and non-lights in small packets, moving almost too fast to make out. It started deep within the light and flew outward, vanishing as it crossed the event horizon.

There was something.

A flash of that light and non-light.

Paul blinked the after-effect away to the sound of a phone bouncing on the floor.

When his vision returned, Shila wasn’t there. Where she’d stood, her tracksuit was pooled on the floor, her phone partially hidden by it, what Paul could see of the screen showing it going through the shutdown process.