

Chapter 41

“You?” The confusion in Grant’s voice pulled Paul’s attention away from the koala. He looked as confused as he’d sounded. “What are you doing here?”

“Why?” the koala answered, amused. “I’m running the show.”

Grant’s snort surprised even him. “You’re in charge? Bullshit. You’re nothing more than some two-bit amateur crafter with, maybe, delusions of being better than he is.”

“Who happens to have fostered the Staff Breaker.” The koala smiled proudly. “You’d be surprised what the right spin did for my position within the order.”

“So you bullshitted your way to the top, like you did everything else in your life?”

“I seem to have done a decent job raising you,” the koala replied, mildly offended.

“Right up to the point where I found out what you raised me for and ran. That wasn’t part of what I was expected to do, was it?”

“Grant, did you ever considered that I did everything I did was *so* you’d find out? That it was the only way I could make sure you escaped your fate?”

Grant didn’t have an immediate comeback. “I did. Maybe some part of me still hung on to that.” He motioned around them. “But this pretty much puts the lie to that, doesn’t it?”

The koala shrugged. “Well, sacrifices do have to be made when you’re looking to improve the world.”

“A guy like you is never looking to improve anything other than his power. And it’s not happening. Again, I’m not playing the part you expect me to. I’m not breaking this.”

“Oh,” the koala said, surprised. “Do you think you’re needed for this?” He smirked. “You always did think too much of yourself, my boy. Come on, this started well before you broke your staff. This has been—”

“Centuries in the making. I know. I met someone who was there for that screw-up. I’m not sitting around while you try to blow up the planet a second time.”

“Not going to happen.” The koala rolled his eyes. “We’re doing it right this time. And if anything gets damaged in the process? Well, what better way to establish my new rule than by remaking the world?”

“Oh yeah,” Grant said sarcastically, “and what a wonderful place that’d be. I’m definitely not letting that happen.”

Wheels squeaked, and before Paul could workout where the sound came from, a cart became visible twenty feet away, it too appearing as if it was moving out from behind something that wasn’t actually there.

The item on it was old, blocky, and large, but...stuff had been added to it. Electronics that looked recent, held by red and blue wires. Metal plates welded in what seemed to Paul haphazard. There was even a book nailed to one of the metal plates.

Whatever this had been, the Chamber had turned it into a talisman.

“Oh, please tell me that isn’t what I think it is,” Niel said in disbelief.

“The genuine article,” the koala said with pride. “Salvaged from the Manhattan project itself for this very purpose. See, boyo, you’re just a happy accident. Something I was

hoping to exploit to increase the effect.” He pointed to the device. “That was always the planned way to start the new age.”

“Niel?” Thomas asked.

“That’s nuclear bomb,” the raccoon answered.

“Shouldn’t it be teardrop-shaped with fins at the time and radiation symbols stamped all over it?” the rat asked.

“You’ve watched too many movies, kid,” the koala said dismissively.

“I’m not a kid,” Thomas said, as Grant said.

“I’m not letting you do this.”

“You really think you’re here to stop it, Son?”

“No one cares why you think I’m here. We are going to stop you and there’s nothing you can do to stop us.” Grant pointed Excalibur at the Koala. “You are a would-be tyrant, and nothing more, Walter. Someone who spent his life stealing other’s work in an attempt to make people think you’re better than you are. Men like you shouldn’t be allowed to stand. I will not let you stand.”

When had Grant picked up Excalibur? Paul certainly hadn’t seen him bend down to take it.

The koala laughed. “You and three kids?”

“Hey,” Paul, Thomas, and Niel exclaimed.

“I’m not a kid,” Thomas repeated. It certainly had been years since Paul had been that.

“I think we can deal with you and that helper of yours.”

“Grant, Grant, Grant,” Walter said in a tone used with a slow child. “When will you ever learn not to trust what’s right in front of you?”

Six Chamber appeared around the room, reach stepping around something that wasn’t there.

“Really getting tired of that trick,” Thomas muttered, echoing Paul’s thoughts. The tiger glanced at the closest torch. Still not smell of smoke, just like he wasn’t smelling the new arrivals.

Why hadn’t he realized what it meant?

“That’s Joan’s sword,” Niel said, and Paul focused on what was important. The staff holders.

“At least she doesn’t have an army to lead this time,” Thomas replied.

“Remember,” Walter said, “Grant’s death must coincide with the detonation if we want to add his strength to the ceremony. Subdue him. I don’t care what you do to the kids.”

The woman with the sword lunged for Grant, and before Paul could step to help, a man swung a staff at him. And actual staff. Only the second Paul had seen to look like what it called itself; although, this one had a fake quality to it that Wuhan’s staff certainly didn’t.

He dodged it, and the ‘swoosh’ sound that accompanied the staff sounded just as fake. The tiger punched, and the man pushed himself to the side, and far too high for the apparent effort. Then he recognized the motion for the kind in old martial art movies he’d watched with Niel and Roland.

Wire work.

A fake staff that let someone do fake moves? What use was that in a real—

The staff’s impact on Paul’s side came with the loud foley version of the sound and

sent him flying across the room. He shoved the pain away the way Arnold's gift let him and growled angrily as he stood.

Well, the hits weren't fake. He'd thank his cousin the next time he saw him for the not broken ribs.

Grant was sword fighting the woman, Niel was solidly kicking the ass of the now staffless man, and Thomas blinked around the room, administrating blows to the other Chamber while—

The koala fidgeted with something on the atomic bomb.

"Thomas! We need that bomb out of here!" Were they crazy enough to detonate it now?

The rat vanished, and Paul barely backed out of the way of the staff, which again swooshed too loudly before his face. Thomas appeared three feet to the side of the koala, dropped to his knees, holding his head and—

Paul bit back the pain that ran up his arm from the not quite properly executed dodge. Focus. He wasn't going to be able to help his friends if he couldn't first take down his opponent.

Paul stepped aside, and the man reacted too quickly. He blocked the staff and for a second lost sensation in his arm, then the man grinned as he stepped aside from the return punch as if he'd know it was coming.

As if this fight was choreographed.

The man planted the staff down, then his feet hit Paul in the chest, and seemed surprised the tiger only staggered back, instead of being thrown off his feet. Before Paul could counter, the man was attacking again and Paul was on the defensive, watching the moves, waiting for an understanding of the fighting style to come.

Only it didn't.

The man wasn't fighting with a style; he was fighting to a script, and only Paul's magically fast reflexes kept him on his feet.

"Get Gilbert!" Grant yelled, and Paul's opponent glanced in the kangaroo's direction. Paul didn't. He put as much strength as he could behind the pounce, and when it connected, the man was sent to the floor and Paul thought he'd let go of the staff, but the hand stayed closed on it and as he stood he wasn't happy.

Looked like it was possible to go off script.

Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas appeared in the doorway, then vanished. Then Movie Staff brought it down and where Paul had stood, the wooden floor cracked, then it was up and with a quick thrust, the end impacted Paul chest, lifting him and he was on his back a few feet away his breathing coming in ragged for the few seconds it took him to get to his feet.

The man watched him, stunned.

Paul stalked the man. He was ending this now.

When the attacks came, quick jabs of the staff, Paul didn't dodge. He settled for deflecting them, getting closer, forcing the man to step back, his eyes ever wider with worry.

"Fall already," he said.

Paul grinned. "The Orrs don't fall."

The man's back hit the wall, and Paul struck. He saw the man duck and roll with nearly cartoon smoothness, then his fist impacted the wall, cracking the wood between a lantern and a stone tablet with hieroglyphs carved on it.

"How about we don't break anything?" Grant's words were punctuated with striking metal. "There's no telling if anything else might set the damned thing off."

Paul glanced around for a gun.

His fucking kingdom for a gun.

He glared at Movie Staff. It was his fault he kept thinking of movie lines.

Actually, was that part of the staff's power?

Movie Staff smiled in triumph as he swung two handed. If that connected, it was going to fucking hurt.

The only move Paul did was to lift his arm a second before the staff was about to hit it. It hit his side, and he felt ribs break, but his arm was down over it as the momentum moved him, and he held on, forcing Movie Staff along with him.

A combination of Paul's light feet, and the staff's magic kept them both upright, and the man's sigh of relief when they came to a stop was interrupted by Paul's fist in his face.

He let the staff fall, grabbed the staggering man by the shirt and look the room over. "Niel, Duck!" He threw the man at the raccoon's opponent as he lifted something over his head Paul and neither the time nor the desire to work out what it might be.

The two men crashed to the ground, accompanied by the sound of a sword doing the same. Paul turned in time to see Grant kick the woman down.

"It's over, Walter."

"You think you're strong enough?" the koala said, still fiddling with the talisman.

"You can't detonate that with you in the room," Grant said. "You're too much of a coward to be willing to die for your cause."

"I'm not going to die. I'm going to be elevated."

Grant stepped forward. The embroidery on the koala's clothes shimmered, and a matching one shimmered between him and the kangaroo.

"You can't get to me, Son. Just accept your role in this. I'll soon be done here and it will—" Walter hurried away from the talisman as it trembled.

Thomas was now in the middle of the room and it looked like the armadillos were the only thing keeping him standing. Lawrence focused on the atomic bomb, brows furrowed, while Gilbert had a gleeful expression Paul expected to see on a kid, Christmas morning, on realizing all the presents under the tree had his name on them.

Or on the face of the world's biggest lover of all things that went ka-boom when looking at the mother of all potential explosions.

The bomb slid away from the stunned koala, and it was next to the armadillo before he reacted.

Grant walked to Walter while Gilbert protectively interposed himself between the koala and the bomb, a ball of plasma in his hand.

With slice up from Excalibur, the shimmering in the air broke a part. "You were the worst parent a guy could ever want." He planted the pommel in the koala's face as he was opening his muzzle, and Walter dropped.

"Guys," Paul called as Gilbert turned and looked at the bomb lovingly. "We might not

be out of the woods yet.”

The Armadillo tenderly caressed the metal casing.

“You know they expect you to disarm it, right Gil?” Lawrence said.

“But it’s so beautiful,” his cousin replied breathlessly, then whispered. “It’s perfect the way it is.”

“Thomas, how about you take it away?” Grant said.

“Not as drained as I am,” he panted. “Had to do this blind. Don’t ask how I’m conscious. I’d really could do with a fuck right now, but I’d rather we made sure all this is dealt with first.” Lawrence lowered the rat to the floor and went to his cousin.

“So…” Niel started, looking at the room. “This is basically every staff in existence, right?”

“Doubtful,” Grant replied, “but probably most of them.”

The raccoon nodded. “Then we just have to take them out of this… arrangement and store them someplace safe, right?” he looked at the kangaroo. “You can take them out without blowing us up, right?”

“I don’t know.” Grant helped Lawrence pull the complaining armadillo away. “I don’t know that anyone’s ever undone a staff. And even if I can, that doesn’t stop the Chamber from looking for them yet again, and we’re dealing with this another time.” He sighed. “Right now, I wish there was a way to just wipe them from existence so there was nothing for the Chamber to go looking…” he trailed off, letting go of the armadillo in favor of looking around the room. He narrowed his eyes, then widened them. Shook his head and started to turn away, only to pause, looked over his shoulder.

“Of course,” Thomas muttered, “he’d get an idea when I can’t teleport away.”

“He has good ideas,” Niel said.

“You clearly haven’t been trotting around the globe with him fore the last five plus years.”

“I think…” he looked the room over again. “Yeah, I think I can do this.”

“Do what, exactly?” Thomas asked cautiously.

“De—” he looked at them. “Deactivate the blow-up-the-world aspect of this thing. I need wood. Lots of wood. And a hammer, some nails—no, make that a lot of nails. Why did I never make a portable woodworking studio?”

“There are tools at the camp,” Lawrence said, holding Gilbert away from the bomb. “We can get you those.”

“There might be some here too,” Niel said. “This was the base of operation of people who make things as their powers, after all.”

“Good, good,” Grant said distractedly, back to studying the room. “I’ll take anything you can find for me.”

Paul offered his hand to Thomas, while the others headed out of the room. “How about you and me go looking for wood?”

The ran snorted. “I’m in no state to move around a place this size looking to bring back wood.”

Paul smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m sure there’s a bed somewhere in this place when you can get some wood.”

How look Thomas looked at him blankly was a good indication of how exhausted he

was. Finally, with a chuckle, he took the offered hand and Paul pulled him to his feet, then he supported him as they went out looking for said bed.