

I was crying.

I held on to Elias tightly and cried.

I cried for Jeremy, for his father, for me. For things I'll never have. Should never have. I'd destroy any sons I have. I wouldn't care enough. I'd care too much.

The otter was dazed. I wasn't gentle with him.

"Wow," he whispered when my sobbing subdued. "I never want to go through this again, but wow."

I wiped my eyes and moved away from him. "Sorry." I fought with my emotions. Trying to get them back under control. This wasn't a side of me I showed people I knew. It isn't how an Orr acts.

He let out a bark of laughter. "Don't be. I think I might have an adrenaline high."

I frowned, then realized he thought I was apologizing for what I did to him. That was for the best.

He grabbed my arm and pulled. "Get back here. After this, we need to sleep."

I hesitated. He probably thought I was weak now. An Orr doesn't cry. We're the personification of toxic masculinity.

He pulled again, and I relented. I needed sleep after all this emotional bullshit. He gave me a loopy grin as I draped an arm over him; then I was out.

* * * * *

The waitress couldn't hide her disbelief as she brought the fifth plate of the breakfast special. We were at a diner serving all-day breakfast. I didn't care it was nine at night. I wanted breakfast after getting out of bed. Elias looked bemused as he enjoyed his steak.

"What do you remember?" he asked and I couldn't keep from glaring. He raised a hand. "You looked out of it. You said you experienced his day, but I don't know what that means."

I nodded and went back to devouring the eggs, bacon, sausage, steak, and hash brown. I motioned for another plate when I was done.

"I heard everything," I finally said. "It's just mixed with the feelings that came with it."

Elias nodded. "So you got the part about him saying everyone knows everyone else in the neighborhood?"

"He hates them," I said. "Hates himself for hating them. Feels they played a part in Jeremy being taken."

The otter raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That's more than psychology, isn't it? Magical emotion reading?"

I shook my head. "Everyone leaks their emotions. Not in a magical way, in a body language way. Micro expression and that crap. Tone of voice, details so minute even computers will miss them, but I'm tuned into that. That could be the magical aspect, I guess. The level of attunement I have. I can't get what isn't there. Like if Jeremy's father hadn't said anything, and I had my back to him, I wouldn't have known how he felt, but it was so loud in his voice I couldn't stop it. And with that, my own emotions are more to the surface than the rest of my family, so if I slip, I get carried away with them."

The waitress put the plate down and took the empties.

"And you can gift that to someone else?"

She gave us a look, but it was no longer a 'I'm going to call the loony bin' and more a 'what are you guys talking about?'. Magic has made it to many corners of the world; enough, we no longer sound crazy.

"Who'd want this?"

"People working with emotionally repressed people, for one."

I shook my head. "You don't understand the lack of control I have, that I'd pass along. You saw the emotional wreck I was."

"You went through a lot."

“That’s not an excuse for losing it like that.”

“I’m okay with what you did.”

“Yeah, and should I point out how weird that is?” Again, he thought I meant the sex. And it was odd he hadn’t packed up and ran for the airport. He was begging me to stop among the scream for me to go harder.

“I’m fine with taking my punishment. But we’re getting off track. He might be right that someone in his neighborhood took part in Jeremy’s disappearance. While you were in the shower, I had the office look into the area. What houses went for sale right after the kidnapping happened.”

I’d showered alone. I wasn’t emotionally stable enough to want company. And I lost it again in there. “I thought you couldn’t use Bureau resources.”

“I can’t make official requests, but I can still ask friends for help. Three houses were put up for sale within two weeks of the disappearance. While the police called it a runaway case, the papers called it a kidnapping, and a perceived drop in the security of the area will cause people to move to a safer one. Two of the houses were long-term residents. The third had only been occupied for a few months before Jeremy vanished.”

I frowned. “Wanna Be bought a house in the neighborhood? That means he had money.”

Elias stared at me. “He rented a house. Most of us can’t just buy houses for a couple of months, then sell them.”

I shrugged. “Okay, so he rented the house. It lets him study the kids without seeming out of place.”

Elias nods. “I looked in the neighborhoods where the other boys lived. We have a similar situation of people moving out, but also that of one house which had only been occupied for a few months before the disappearance. In fact, of the five neighborhoods, four houses were rented on exactly the same day. And each one was vacated within weeks of the boy vanishing.”

“Wanna Be picked the areas at the same time,” I said. “Then he left once he was done with it.”

“And camouflaged it among other families moving out.”

“Do you have a name for who rented the houses?”

Elias shook his head. “That’s going to take a while. Without making this an official investigation, we can’t simply demand the records.”

“Give me the addresses.” I pulled out my phone and motioned to the otter to get on with it when he hesitated.

Black, I wrote to a random destination. *You got me into this, you’re going to help out. Who rented these houses?* I put the addresses and dates they were rented.

“I have resources too,” I told Elias.

“How many laws are they going to break?”

I shrugged. “I don’t ask.” I went back to eating.

* * * * *

The apartment building was in bad shape.

“At least it isn’t a warehouse this time,” Elias said as we stepped out of his rental. I tilted an ear at him. “You have no idea how many times I’ve tracked down some criminal and found them hold up in a warehouse. It’s like after years of movies and TV shows using warehouses for filming locations of evil lairs, criminals now think that’s where they need to go.”

I quirked a smile. “Evil lair?”

He shrugged. “You know what I mean.” He indicated the building. “This, at least, is a change. You think it’s safe?”

“I doubt Wanna Be’s in there.” Black came back with the name of a holding company set up a few days before the houses were rented, and among its portfolio was this apartment.

“Not what I mean. This looks like it’s going to fall in around us the moment we step in.”

I smiled. “You can stay out here if you want.”

The otter raised an eyebrow. “I’m not letting you go in there alone.”

“Then in we go.” My initial thought on finding out it was an apartment building was that

Wanna Be had also lived here and there was a sixth boy no one had reported. But the condemned order had been on the building for years even back then, so the other option was that this was his kill site.

I shone a light on the walls and floor. The sunlight from the open door refused to push far.

“The basement,” I tell Elias when he started up the stairs.

“You sure?”

I nodded. “If he’s trying to imitate or recreate a ritual from the Society, he’s going to use the basement as much as possible. We’re far enough north, they should have one for the electrical and water.”

“Is being underground something important for your faction?”

I hesitated before answering. Even if I grew up with my family an official part of the Society, the way we’re viewed and treated by most of them makes it difficult to think of myself as one of them. I also wondered if Elias is fishing for information, but with Zikabar being the Brislw Elder’s fuck buddy, if the FBI wanted information, he’d suck it out of the cheetah.

“Our places of power are all underground. I think it’s created a mindset where important ceremonies need to take place there.”

“Like the ones for acceptance, dominance, and submission? You guys don’t do that, right?”

“Dominance and submission are loaded terms for my family, and acceptance...” I chuckled. “We’re Orrs. If you don’t accept us, you can just go fuck yourself.”

Elias opened a door and illuminated the stairs going down. “Horror movie, here we go.”

“Just remember, I’m the monster in this movie, and I’m on your side.”

“Only while we want the same thing,” he replied matter-of-factly. I liked that he could understand that, even after all the sex we had, and be okay with it. “I was under the impression every member of a faction had the same rituals and ceremonies.”

The stairs creaked under his weight and complained loudly under mine. I have to outweigh him by a good hundred and fifty pounds of muscle. “You’re touching on philosophy more than anything else. A god doesn’t want the same thing all the time.” I paused, shining my light around the dilapidated space. People left a lot of stuff behind when they vacated the building.

“With mine, when the Society made their pact, he was starving, so they got a lot out of it, but in exchange, they needed to make sure they fed him constantly. By the time my ancestor made his pact, feeding wasn’t an issue, so he didn’t get as much, but in a way, it’s more concentrated. If you ask my fathers, they still think it’s because we were made to lead his followers. Personally, I think we’re his attack force.”

“There’s a cleared space here,” Elias called, and I joined him. The space was deliberately cleared. The mound of clothing and boxes at the periphery made that obvious. The floor was covered with dust, but under that, nothing. This was where Wanna Be performed his twisted rituals.

“What about the Antarctic group?” He asked, carefully stepping around.

“You realized you should have more information on them than I do. You guys actually met some.”

“I’d still like your family’s point of view on them.”

I chuckled. “You’ll have to settle for mine. My dads don’t discuss their opinions until you’ve pissed them off and then they scream them at you. I think they’re a security measure. My god’s insurance that if the worse comes to pass, he’ll have someone providing him with nourishment.”

“And then there’s the missionaries.”

I rolled my eyes. “We are not responsible for them.”

“Your grandfathers tried sacrificing them and it backfired. I think that makes your family responsible for their existence.”

I shone the light on him. “And are you going to bitch too?”

“I just want your opinion. Who’s complaining?”

“Half the society acts like we did it specifically to diminish their standings. Like adding more branches will make theirs weaker. Like a god as a limit to how much he can give us. Their insistence on the family structure is artificial, anyway. The Hertz demonstrated that. If our god cared about that, either they wouldn’t have been allowed to become their own branch, or the

Lewiston would have ceased to be. And they're there to help repopulate his followers without him having to make more pacts."

Elias nodded and crouched, shining the light on the center of the space. "Can you get anything of what he was trying to do?"

"Not after eight years. Whatever blood he used is gone, and with that, even if there had been power there, it would have vanished too. And if he hasn't managed to create a working ritual at the farmhouse, I doubt eight years ago he had a working one."

"Our working theory is that he thinks the kids have some sort of connection to the Society. Their species match."

I snorted. "The Society has over a hundred and fifty species in it. He'd have to work hard to pick one that isn't represented there."

"Yeah, but whatever he is, sane isn't part of it. He's created some fantasy, and the boys he kidnaps, rapes, and then kills serve a purpose within it."

My blood boiled at the thought he raped the boys, and I had to work at controlling my anger. Something else my fathers spared me, although I'm sure Elias would argue what my brothers put me through qualifies as rape, instead of just brotherly razing. I returned the favor on most of them. Wolf is the only one who never was on the receiving end of those games.

"I'm okay," I told him. "But when I find him, I'm not leaving anything for your guys."

Elias smiled. "I'll let my department know we have competition. It should encourage them to work harder since we like being the ones to bring criminals to justice."

"I'll document everything and send it to you so you know he was properly punished."

"Please don't. As much as he deserves an Orr punishment, the law isn't going to look kindly on your sending us evidence of your crime. I don't think Assistant Director Bodenman will be able to keep the order for your capture from being sent out."

"Wouldn't want to inconvenience the deer, now would I?" I grumbled, shining my light to a wall and noticing a pattern in the scratches. What I'd at first thought had been caused by furniture being moved around and scoffing the two exposed walls now seems familiar. I took out my phone and looked through the pictures of the farmhouse crime scene.

Noticing where my attention was directed, Elias shone his light there. "Something?"

"Possibly. This looks a lot like that one." I traced the symbol and showed him the zoomed one on my phone.

He took out his and studied the walls too. "I think I have another one here. Don't do anything to them. I might be able to get people here to study the scene. This is definitely his, but why scratch them you guys use cum and blood."

"Maybe he didn't understand that when he was here." I found three more.

"That would mean this happened early in his career." Elias pointed out two more. They were crude, but the resemblance was there.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and a message appeared over the image. "I have the information on the corporation who owned the houses and this building." Black hadn't replied to my demand for more information than this address. So I'd forwarded the information of other hackers my family did business with.

That's a nice way to say that we own them. They're still in business only because we protect them. We still pay for their services, we aren't slavers, but if they even think of doing something against us, we'll hand them over to the authorities, if they are lucky.

"Who is it?"

"Just a numbered company, but they got the name of the guy who owns it. Joseph Abraham."

"The name doesn't ring a bell." He looked at his phone. "According to my search result, the most likely possibility is that he's a local businessman, buffalo, owns ranches, his family had holdings in oil, back when that was a thing. I don't see a history of owning housing. You think he's Wanna Be?"

"He's ninety-two," I answered, looking at the man's bio. "I doubt it."

"Magic does let people live longer, and he has the money to buy it."

I looked at the otter. "That's a good point." I placed a call to Anakin.

“Anakin Aging Protection, How can I direct your call?”

“What the fuck?” I told the man who answered my dad’s phone.

“Ahh, you’d be family.”

“Ya think? That’s my dad’s personal phone you’re answering.”

“Yes, sorry, I guess you haven’t received the memo about it. His number was leaked, and he has a new one, but he doesn’t want to cancel this one because the people calling it still want to do business with him.”

I growled and rubbed my face. Did I miss the memo about it, or did one of my brothers screw with my message center again? “Is he with a client?”

“No, I’ll transfer you.”

“Yes?” Anakin answered. In the background I heard Japanese, explosions, and sound effects, so he was at his club.

“Dad, Wyatt.”

“Hey, how’s my wayward son? You going to drop by at any point within the month? The new Alien Cross OVA is coming out this month. Aiden got me the rights to the premier of it.”

I stifled the sigh. Dad is... well, he’s Dad. More child than his kids at times. I get it comes from his fathers indulging his interest in toys and anime and all that stuff as a way of controlling him, since no one in their right mind wants to alienate the fountain of youth, but while the rest of my fathers claim he’s grown up a lot after the events with Brian, I don’t see it.

“I need to know if you have a Joseph Abraham as a client. He’s a buffalo, he’s ninety-two.”

“No, not one of mine, you think he’s worth reaching out to?” meaning can we get something out of promising him a much longer life? I looked over the list of assets his bio mentioned and saw nothing there we needed. It’s been a long time since we needed to reach out to someone.

“I doubt it. Thanks.” I disconnected before he could start on the latest series he was financing. The last I heard, he and his partner—business partner—were pushing to get more Kaiju series made since the appeal of giant monsters had waned with the revelation magic was real. Dad hadn’t gotten over that yet.

“Not through us,” I told Elias.

“There are others offering life extension. Ninety isn’t as old as it used to be.”

“How about we go ask him?” I turned my phone to show him the old man’s home address. These days, you have to pay a lot of hackers to ensure your information isn’t easily found with simple searches.