

# Chapter 37

“How could you do this?” Grant yelled, kept from reaching the seal by the three men straining to hold him back.

Wassa stood in the center of the tent, sigils written around her. The men who’d drawn them said they could hold her, but Paul wasn’t certain anything could hold someone powerful enough to hold herself in stasis for centuries.

For the moment, their capabilities weren’t significant, as all Wassa did was look impassively at the kangaroo. The better question might be if they would keep Grant from strangling her.

“Did he drop by San Francisco Bay while I wasn’t looking?” Thomas asked. “Because that’s some Orr level of strength and anger if I’ve ever seen him display, and I’ve watched him face off against Kingsley, three times.”

“She just betrayed us,” Niel said. “I think he’s got reasons to be angry.”

“That’s not Arnold’s gift,” Paul said, noticing her glancing in their direction. “If he had it, they wouldn’t be holding him. He’d be wiping the floor with them on his way to her.”

“I do,” the seal finally said, tone hard, “what must be done.”

“You had to betray us?” Grant demanded. “What kind of bullshit is that?”

“I have tried the other way,” she replied, teeth clenching, “but you will not listen. You will not understand what you are. You continue believing you are but a Practitioner without a staff when you are so much more.”

“So what?” Grant snapped. “You’re going to work with that wolf because he *also* thinks I’m so fucking special?”

She got her anger under control. “I will work with him because it will create the situation where you will shine and lead us to victory.”

The kangaroo stopped fighting the men and stared at her. “I am not some savior,” he stated. “We’re going to win this.” He motioned to the people assembled in the large tent. “By all of us working together.”

“And how can they do that without you?” she asked.

“I’m not a leader!” he snapped.

“This doesn’t need a leader,” she spat. “There are always too many of those. Leaders, in a hurry to take control and lead the situation astray. This doesn’t need one of those. It needs you.” She looked at Grant, her expression pained. “It needs hope.”

He let out a bark of mirthless laughter, throwing his hands in the air.

“That is what you are. How do you not see it?” Her voice cracked. “You *are* the beacon of hope in the center of the storm. The stronger the storm, the brighter you shine. Did you not see what you did at the beach?”

“That was Excalibur,” he replied dismissively.

“It was Excalibur in your hands,” she searched his face. “Powered by the hope the storm can be defeated.”

“You’re insane,” the kangaroo said with a chuckle. “That’s the only reason for this.”

You're fucking insane."

"What I am," Wassa said, straightening, her confidence returning, "is willing to do what must be done to ensure the Chamber does not succeed. If I had been willing to sully myself before, we would not be here today."

"Yeah. We'd all be under the Chamber's control," Grant spat and surged forward too fast for the men to grab him. Thomas appeared before the kangaroo as Paul and Niel and Roland started moving. Then they were helping the rat hold back Grant. "Let go of me so I can wring her fucking neck."

"You can't do that," Thomas said.

"Why? Because I'm such a paragon of hope?"

"Because she still has to answer questions," Paul replied. "And you killing her—" if he even could. "—isn't going to give us that."

"It's going to give me satisfaction." He glared at the seal.

"Grant," Neal said in an understanding tone, "let the others deal with this. Right now, cooler heads are needed to handle her."

"We're not done," he snarled at her, then turned and stormed out with enough suddenness they nearly fell. Niel, Thomas, and Roland hurried to follow the kangaroo while Paul hesitated. He didn't know how much help he'd be; he didn't have the connection to Grant the three of them did.

On the other hand, he realized as Wassa fixed him with a hard gaze. He'd be of absolutely no use here, and he probably wouldn't be comfortable with the methods that would be used to get answers out of her.

Donal was beside Paul, a few steps out of the tent, panting. "What happened? I heard Grant yelling."

"Wassa's in league with the Chamber."

"What?" Donal asked in disbelief. Paul only had a shrug for an answer.

"No wonder the Chamber showed up before we were ready," Gran snarled, pacing in a circle between two tents. He kicked a stone. "She told them it's where we were going." He pulled Excalibur out and threw it to the ground. "All those men died because of her! She's been lying to me from the start!"

Roland stepped back as the sword came to a stop near him.

"Are we sure she's working with them?" Donal asked.

"I caught her talking with God Wolf," Paul said. "Then she tried to kill me," he added as the squirrel opened his mouth.

"But I don't get it," Niel said. "What's the point? If she's working with the Chamber, why did she put herself in cryo-sleep for a thousand years? Wouldn't it make more sense for her to stick around and help them?"

Rolan cautiously stepped around the sword. "Maybe she wanted to be sure she'd be around to benefit from what they're doing."

"She probably thinks she's the one who deserves to absorb all the gods," Gran grumbles and kicked another stone.

"But she saved us from the Chamber in Iceland," Donal insisted.

"Did she?" Thomas asked. "I mean, did she know they were Chamber? She woke up to a conflict. A lot of aggressors, a few prisoners. No matter who was who, the smallest

number was the easiest one to control.”

Grant screamed.

“Grant, she fooled everyone,” Neal said.

“I was raised by one of them!” the kangaroo snapped. “I was used and manipulated. When I escaped that, I spent my life doing everything I could to stop them from pulling others into the situation I was in. What did I then do? I swallowed her story without one fucking question.”

“To be fair,” Paul said, “you questioned her a lot.”

Grant glared at him, then at the sword. “That thing was probably her plan all along. Get me to push myself to apotheosis with it.”

“Can that happen?” Neal asked. “I thought that as a Practitioner, it could only happen with your own staff.”

“My life’s been filled with the impossible since I broke it, so who fucking knows anymore.”

“She believes what she said,” Denton said, joining them.

Grant rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t trust one thing she says.”

“I’m not. She was thinking it.”

“You read minds?” Roland’s ears reddened as they folded back.

The cheetah chuckled. “Only surface thoughts. And you’re aren’t any different from the men here.” He focused on Grant again. “But I think she’s right about you.”

“I am not some savior!” Grant yelled in exasperation.

“Take it from someone who’s been in your position. If your god’s made you his—”

“Will you fucking stop thinking the whole fucking worlds works the way you want it to work?” Grant demanded. “I don’t have a god!”

Paul watched as Denton unclenched his teeth and take slow breath, wondering if he was going to keep control and what might happen if—the cheetah glanced at him and gave a small smile and a shrug. His ears burned, plastered against his skull. The guy was a mind reader, and Paul had—

“Alright,” Denton said in a calm voice. “Regardless of that, there is something different about you and her.”

“And you know that how?” Grant asked sarcastically.

“Magic.”

The kangaroo rolled his eyes.

“I have a sense for it,” the cheetah said. “You aren’t the first Practitioner I’ve encountered, although he never told me what he was. Him, Code, and Wuhan have a feel to their magic that doesn’t match yours.” He pointed at the sword. “Yours and Wassa’s magic feels more like what’s in that.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. But it’s why she contacted God Wolf. She believes he’s like you and her.”

“Is he?” Thomas asked.

Denton shrugged. “I’d have to have met him to know.”

“He did say that you and him were the same, back in Italy,” Niel said, then grinned. “A lot.”

“Fine,” Grant grumbled unhappily. “Not that it helps us unless you think I can lure God Wolf out because we’re the same. And if one of you mentions using my looks,” he said, glaring at Thomas, who closed his muzzle. “To get him to come to my bed, I’m going to do something very nasty to you.”

Roland closed his muzzle.

“Like that’d take a lot of work,” Neil said. “God Wolf’s got the hots for you big time.”

“Niel,” Grant warned.

“I’m just saying that you flash that body of yours to him and he gets kind of single-minded about making you his.”

“What if you flashed a different body at him?” Paul said, then startled at realizing he’d spoken out loud. The idea had just been forming. Then the actual words registered, and he shook his head. “Not actually flashing her body at him.”

“Flashing whose body?” Grant asked as Denton covered his smile with a hand.

“Not flashing anyone,” Paul stated. “But we have a lot of magic around. If someone can make you look like Wassa, can’t you call God Wolf and get him to let you inside so you can join forces?”

“We do have the talisman she used to contact him,” Denton said as Grant looked ready to protest. “My concern is that God Wolf can sense that you aren’t her, the way he and she seem to know you’re different from other Practitioners.”

“That can’t happen over a projection,” Grant replied. “Which is what she did. It’s the only thing she can have done based on what Paul saw.” He glared at the smile Denton gave him. “And even if I wanted to, I can’t just send up a general call and hope he picks up. With the Magic Donal and Code had floating around, not to say anything of what your people added, I need a targeted signal, and that needs knowledge about him I don’t have.”

Thomas coughed.

Grant glared.

The rat got himself under control and tried to look innocent. “But you do know him better than she did, don’t you? She managed it after being in his presence once for what, twenty seconds? You’ve been in his for longer than that, multiple times. Even if we don’t take into account Monaco—”

“Please don’t,” Grant said, ears folding back.

“You’ve been close enough to touch him half a dozen times. You’ve smelled him. And taking into account Monaco, you’ve smelled him from really up close.”

“Thomas,” Grant warned.

Paul exchanged a look with Niel and Roland, but they appeared as confused as he felt regarding what Monaco might be about. He looked at Denton, since he had to know what Grant and Thomas were thinking, but the cheetah’s face was blank.

The kangaroo sighed. “Fine. We do need to do *something*. That’s an idea, even if it’s a bad one. Worse comes to worse, it doesn’t work, and we aren’t any further up shit’s creek. I’m going to need her talisman and material to make the illusion.”

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Wassa in her pale gown stood before them, arms crossed over her chest. The look was perfect, except for the expression. The scowl was all Grant.

“You done gawking?” she asked.

“I’m not gawking,” Thomas replied. “I’m admiring. You make a beautiful—”

“I’m going to hit you,” she stated.

“Sorry.” The rat smirked. “Not interested in women.”

Paul watched her, him? Move as Grant, looking like Wassa, took position before the talisman. Hopefully, God Wolf wouldn’t ask him to move, because this Wassa had none of the grace the seal displayed when she moved.

“You guys want to move away?” she asked. “We know, from what Paul told us, that God Wolf can see what’s going on around me through this.”

Paul stepped back and hid behind a tree, with the others doing the same.

There had been talk of placing the call under a controlled environment, but no one had been able to come up with a justification for Wassa calling God Wolf from inside one of the tents after being found out.

“You didn’t get caught.” God Wolf sounded amused. Paul looked at his phone. Not quite a minute to get the talisman to work. “I was wondering if I’d ever find out the reason you wanted to talk when you didn’t to this again.”

“They were never going to capture me,” Wassa answered. “But ensuring I made it away safely took time. But I am here. I am ready to make my offer.”

“You think you have something I want?” the amusement was gone, replace by... desire? Paul wasn’t sure.

“I do not have him,” she said, tone sharp enough Paul worried it would give the act away. When she continued, her voice was smoother. “But I have something you are the rightful heir to.”

“I thought you meant for *him* to have this,” God Wolf said, sounding hungry to Paul, instead of suspicious.

A look at Thomas to confirm it showed the rat peeing around the tree, watching the conversation. Paul didn’t dare.

“His role was to forge it, not wield it. But I needed him to believe it was his, so he would do it. Appeal to his need to be special, or—”

“He is special,” God Wolf growled threateningly. “He is like us.”

“No one is like you,” Wassa replied, and Paul was amazed at Grant’s ability to make her sound enticing considering how loud he was in his dislike of God Wolf. “Only you are the rightful bearer of Excalibur. When the time comes, it should be in your hands. It will be my honor to hand it to you personally. You have but to tell me where to be so I can deliver it.”

The silence stretched, and Paul couldn’t resist anymore.

From where he stood, they were in profile. Her head bowed, holding Excalibur in both hands by the flat of the blade, an offering for the massive wolf. God Wolf looking at it with naked hunger.

“Be at the south side of the property in thirty minutes,” the wolf said, a smile forming. “There is the perfect entrance for you to use. A servant’s gate.”

“I shall be there as requested...my liege.”

God Wolf puffed out his chest before he disappeared.

“I am going to stab him with this thing,” she snarled, throwing Excalibur to the

ground angrily. She grabbed the top of her head and pulled. Wassa's image shattered as the hooded cloak came off the kangaroo. Grant had made it from a cut up arctic blanket, the pieces sewed to a sheet. Flat, it looked like an unfolded disco ball to Paul.

Grant had talked about broken mirrors and concepts of false images being reflected. Controlling light and what others saw. Thomas had nodded along as if he understood, which he might, considering how long he'd been working with the Practitioner, but Paul simply accepted it was magic and left it at that.

The inside of the cloak had other items, each another use of concepts to control the result toward what the kangaroo had wanted.

"That's part one successful," Denton said. Instead of the suit Paul was used to seeing the cheetah in, he wore the same black and gray body armor as the six men who accompanied him. "Now we need to get into position. Thomas, How confident you can get the men inside with you?"

The rat joined another group of men in black and gray. "It's line of sight. It'll be fine. Numbers don't matter, so long as we have direct contact. Didn't you practice it?"

"I did, but I have more energy than you do. What I can do with your power doesn't reflect what you're capable of."

"That's cheating," Tomas said.

"Blame our god." Denton faced Paul, Niel, and Roland. "Niel, you need to gather your friends and take position. I don't know how long it's going to take me to find the source of the forcefield or to negate the magic powering it. But you and your friends need to be ready to lead the men through the caverns the instant you can enter them."

"My father will be overjoyed," the raccoon replied, too happy about the situation for Paul's liking.

"I'm with Thomas," Roland said before Denton spoke. "I'm pocket sized."

The cheetah nodded. Which was good. It'd be useless for him to try to keep the brothers apart through this.

"Paul, get your men ready. Once the forcefield falls, everyone has to be inside."

"We'll be ready," Paul said, joining Niel in heading back to the camp.