

Chapter 36

Denton excused himself as soon as they got in the house and headed for the shower. He felt wrung out, both with having to expend a lot of power to burn that thread, and dealing with Alice again.

He stood under the water, set to hotter than he probably should, but the scalding heat helped his body relax. He had to find a way to figure out how much power it took to cut magical threads. He couldn't continue almost exhausting himself to do it.

The door to the bathroom opened. Denton wasn't surprised, but he didn't look to see who it was. He entered the shower and hissed lightly when the very hot water hit him.

"Are you okay?" Stefan asked.

Denton smiled. He'd expected it would be him. "Just tired. I can't understand what's going on with Alice. We were partner for six years. I've looked after their house when Jack finally convinced her to go on a cruise. Now she's acting like I'm the most evil guy she's run into." He lifted his face to the water, letting it massage his jaw muscles. They were sore with all the teeth gnashing he'd been doing. "Are all the church people assholes, or is she being specially pissy?"

"I couldn't really say. This was the first time I've had to interact with them." Stefan put his hands on Denton's shoulders and hissed again. "How can you stand how hot it is? We work hard to keep to the edicts so we don't have to deal with them. But if the stories I've heard are accurate, that does seem to be how they are. the guy with her wasn't any nicer."

"That's just how Flint is. I'm sure he was born an asshole." He cooled the water, and Stefan hugged him.

"Don't let her get to you. I'm sure you'll be able to work things out."

"If she was serious about ruining my career, I don't see how we'll do that."

"You think she'd really do that?"

"She wasn't faking the anger." He sighed. "This is fucking screwed up." He straightened. "Were you planning on showering? Or were you just keeping me company?"

"Just here for you."

"Then do you mind if we dry up and go snuggle? I could use a nap."

"It'd be my pleasure."

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The nap turned out to be on the long side. It was after dinner when Denton finally got dressed and joined the others in Maximilian's office. The sleep and sex had done him a world of good. Stefan was right behind him.

"Sorry for showing up so late."

The office was large and stately. Books lined the back wall, on dark wood shelves. Photographs and paintings of cougars were hung in a row just below the ceiling. Previous generations, Denton expected. Everyone was standing about the large desk in the middle of the room, making it look more like a command center than an office right now.

"It's okay," Martin replied. "Everyone's been taking it easy except those two." He pointed at Leroy at one end of the desk and a kangaroo at the other. "That's Yanik Longner."

"I asked him to come help with your adoption situation," Maximilian said. "And he's agreed to help Leroy. Yanik is the best slicer in all of Australia."

"Yer just trying to flatter me, buddy. Anyway, always love me a good challenge." The kangaroo's accent was nowhere near as strong as Denton had expected.

"Right now he's slicing through the Albuquerque University security."

"Why?" Denton asked, moving close to the desk. He'd expected the top to be wood, like the sides, but it was a display, with hundreds of papers on it. "I thought he was from Seattle."

"That's where he last lived," Leroy said, "but he taught for three years in Albuquerque. I already did a quick sifting of everything that's there."

Denton nodded and put a finger on the corner of a random page, then shook it to bring it to the top of the screen. It was a lease agreement for an apartment in Seattle.

"Before you go any further, I have some information about Damian." That got everyone's attention. "I didn't mention it in the car 'cause I didn't want to have to go through it twice. I also wasn't planing on sleeping so long."

"You needed it," Maximilian said. "I doubt these few hours will make much difference."

Denton nodded. "Well, I sort of found him."

"What do you mean 'sort of'?"

"When I touched Carmichael's thread, I found myself someplace else. A cave, and Damian's body was, trapped I think, in something I couldn't see. But there was something strange about that place. I was solid there. I could punch him, and he threw me against a wall. Actually he didn't have to touch me to send me there."

"Okay, wait, back up a bit," Martin said. "You said he was trapped in something, but he got out of it?"

"No, his body is trapped, but he can step out of it, like I can."

"Where is the cave?" Maximilian asked.

"That's where the 'sort of' comes in. I don't know. While there I got a sense I was very far, but I that's all I can say."

Maximilian shook his head. "That makes no sense. If he's been trapped there for all these years, he should be dead. There's no way he could manage to sustain his body without sex."

"Wait, it's possible to live off sex?" Denton asked.

"There's a Phrase for that," Maximilian said dismissively. "How has he managed that. What did the cave look like?"

"Well, it was a cave, I guess. I mean, I've never seen any before. There were stone columns around it, oh, and everything looked real."

"Wouldn't that be expected?" Bruce asked.

"No, when I'm out of my body, everything is translucent, barely visible, except for you and magic."

"You see magic," Fred said, "Makes sense the rest wouldn't really be there."

"Oh, and there were symbols in the wall, they could be sigils, but I'm not familiar with enough of them to tell in the short time I was there."

Maximilian stopped pacing and looked at Denton. "How many columns were there?"

"I don't know." Denton tried to remember. "A few of them. I wasn't really paying attention."

The older cougar looked through the books on the shelves, everyone watching him. He pulled out a few and put them back, before finding the one he wanted. He flipped through the pages and then put in on the desk. "Is that it?"

It was an old drawing. The artist had stood in the mouth of the cave. It was roughly circular, with columns along the walls, thirteen, Denton counted. On the walls symbols were drawn. In the middle of the room was an altar, with four columns at each corner.

"The altar and those columns weren't there, but the rest is pretty accurate. What is it?"

"It's one of the God's Hearths." Maximilian nodded to himself. "That's how the tiger survived."

"What's this Hearth do?" Fred asked. "This is the first time I've ever heard of them."

"We don't know. There are six of them, as far as we know, but all we have on them are theories. Currently the most accepted one is that they are where the power we generate when having sex gathers before going to the God. If his body is in one of them, then he's connected to direct power, that's how he managed to survive."

"Okay, so six possible locations." Denton stated. "Well we reduced the size of the hay stack."

"They aren't exactly local," Maximilian said. "But we can

have people check all of them."

"There has to be a way to find out which one he's in."
Denton idly flipped papers about on the display.

"The Orrs," Colby said.

There was a moment of silence.

"He's right," Oscar said. "They're the ones who trapped him there, there should be records of them going to the cave." He looked at Yanik. "Can you get into their files?"

"The Orrs?" the kangaroo said. "You mean the tigers in San Francisco?"

Oscar nodded.

"I've heard stories about them, and what they do to people who poke their nose into their business."

"I thought you liked a challenge," Bruce said.

"I do, but I heard they'll go after my family and turn them into their sex slaves."

Martin and Denton exchanged a glance.

"Those are just rumors," Maximilian said. "They aren't that extreme."

"How about you just poke at the edge of their systems for now," Martin offered. "See how strong their defenses are,"

"Where are those Hearths?" Denton asked.

"One's in Egypt," Maximilian answered.

"Near the Hurghada resort," Bruce added.

Maximilian nodded. "That where the Society started. There's one in the Khangai Nuruu National Park, in Mongolia. The Orrs come from there. There's one in the Columbia Forest Reserve, in Belize, another in the Anatoliki mountain, in Greece..."

"Wait," Leroy piped up. "Belize?"

"Yes."

The horse pushed his computer aside and looked through the papers on the screen. "I saw something about that in there." Pages were flying everywhere, bouncing off the edges. "Here." He put a hand on one before it drifted off. "Okay, it's a grant request to go study a site in Belize," he read. "It's in the Columbia Forest Reserve!" He hunted more papers.

"What's the grant for?" Martin asked.

"He's an archaeologist," Leroy replied. "I'm guessing there's a site he wants to study."

"There is an old Mayan structure near the mountain."
Maximilian put the book away.

"Alright, so that's where Damian is."

"There! I knew there was more." Leroy cleared the pages around the one he was holding. "Okay, he had five others on the time. Two pilots, and three graduate students."

"That could be some of the others Damian is using."

"It is," Colby put a finger on one of the photos, a coyote.

"Yeah," Bruce confirmed. "That guy was at the factory building, and so was he." he pointed to the Llama. "He's a pilot, Emilio Durass," he read. "He has a private license, so he might have a plane."

"You think they flew off?" Oscar asked.

"Where would they go?" the jackal replied.

"They have to know we have Carmichael."

Martin's phone beeped.

"Where ever they went, it's because Damian told them to." Denton stated. "Whatever else he is, he's an Orr. These guys like to be in charge, to control things. I doubt he appreciates free thinkers."

"Err, Dent?" Martin handed him his phone, worry on his face. "It's for you."

Frowning Denton took it and read the message, it was from Zikabar

Dear Denton,

Your phone seems to have stopped working (You should have that seen to) so I decided to contact you through your fake FBI friend.

The attached photos came to my attention via a friend in the police. I thought you would like to see them.

He put the phone on the desk, and pulled the photos out of it to the desk's surface. Six of them, of Matthew. He was shirtless and shown from different sides on each images. Some of the guys around him gasped.

In the photos Carmichael was standing without his shirt on. His body was carved with symbols. They still looked fresh the blood red and bright, but his shirt, held next to him, was clean. There were half a dozen symbols on his chest, two in his left arm, and three on the right. His back had a good dozen of them.

Denton looked up at Fred.

Fred shook his head. "They aren't sigils. I've never seen anything like them."

"Did the church do that to him?" Oscar asked.

"No," Denton replied. "They would still be oozing blood if they were that recent."

"But they look fresh." Frank pulled a picture close. "I swear, this looks like fresh cuts."

"They aren't." Denton pointed the shirt in a picture. "No blood on it." He looked at Maximilian. "Is this something our God makes possible? You said that blood is the most powerful of our fluids. Does it let us do something like that? Is this some form of blood magic?"

Maximilian shook his head. Denton eyed him suspiciously. "I swear Denton. If someone in the Society could do this, I'd know about it. It would be in our records, even if it was now outlawed. This isn't how He works. He doesn't ask for sacrifice, or require that we mutilate ourselves for our power. He feeds off our sexual energy. That how we worship him."

"Can the Orrs do that?"

"No, we would have heard about it."

"You realize what this means, right?" Denton looked at him. "If the Orrs can't do this, he's working with someone who can."