

The ranch-style house was large, but with minimal security. Cameras so the occupants knew who was approaching, but no gate, no wall except for the fence keeping the quad bovines and equines from running off.

“You going to be with Royal Security, Mister Cartwright?” Elias asked. He just couldn’t stop teasing me about it. I’d explained why I wasn’t an Orr as part of the security company. Being identified as the owner’s son wouldn’t be helpful, but he just found it hilarious that me, a mighty Orr, had an alias.

“No.” I pressed the buzzer and immediately the door opened and a rhino that would make uncle Dietrich hire him on the spot and give his head trainer the boner to end all boners looked us over. “Wyatt Orr, I’m here to speak with your boss.”

“Mister Abraham isn’t accepting visitors without an appointment,” the rhino replied and made to close the door. I put my hand on it and it stopped. The man didn’t show the effort he put in pushing on it, but I could feel him trying.

I smiled. “Unless your boss wants to have to explain to the FBI why he helped a child molester and killer, he’s going to explain it to me. And if I don’t like his answer, he’s not going to have to worry about explaining anything to anyone. Ever.”

Elias raised an eyebrow, and the rhino reached for the gun at his hip. Texans and their guns.

“Let them in, Walter,” a reedy voice came from the man’s radio clipped on his other side. Radio? In this day and age?

The rhino wasn’t happy, but he escorted us to a bedroom and I heard the sounds of machines before I saw them. Joseph Abraham lay on a bed surrounded by them. He looked nothing like the pictures on the bio I’d found. There, he was a strong and proud man. Here, he was frail, still defiant, but without strength.

“You have some explaining to do,” I told him. Of course, I care that he’s dying. I can’t help that part of myself, but the man provided a child molester housing to select his target from and to perform his twisted rituals. I won’t let his old age influence me.

He raised an eyebrow. “Do I? I don’t think you’re the police.”

I stepped closer and the rhino interposed himself.

“It’s alright, Walter.” The rhino glowered but moved away.

“What kind of monster are you?” I demanded.

He laughed weakly. “Oh, that’s rich, coming from you, Mister Wyatt Orr, considering the things your family has done. You should clean your own house before you complain about how messy someone else’s is.”

“So you know who I am. Good. Then you know if you don’t answer to my satisfaction, there’s nothing that guy can do to keep me from snapping your neck.”

“Oh joy,” the man said. “Threatening my life. Look around. It’s already under threat.”

“These tell me you aren’t ready to give up yet,” I commented. “So you don’t want me to kill you. And to be clear, my house is clean. We don’t go around helping child killers.”

“Of course you don’t,” the buffalo said derisively and looked at Elias. “I don’t recognize you. Are you a Chouteau?”

I snorted. “You think I’d work with one of those assholes?”

“You know bout the Chouteau?” Elias asked. “The Society?”

“And the Thinkers, the Sisters, the Green man, and the others. I may be old, but I’m not stupid. When the world changes around me, I learn everything I can about it.”

“I’m Elias Johns. I’m helping Wyatt investigate the disappearance of five boys eight years ago.”

“He owns you, you mean.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” the otter replied.

The old man rolled his eyes. “The Orrs own people. They don’t have friends, they don’t seek help. They demand it and if you don’t give it, they make you pay.”

I didn't contradict him, and the man seemed surprised.

"Your information isn't entirely accurate," Elias said, "but the status of my relationship with Wyatt isn't relevant. You provided housing to a murderer. I'm curious how you justify your actions."

"You think I knew what he was planning?"

"I didn't read anything about you coming forward with information," Elias said.

The man frowned at him. "I didn't think the police worked with people like him."

"Didn't you say he owns me? Wouldn't he not give me the choice?" Elias was enjoying himself. He didn't get to play around with truths during a normal investigation. But as nice as it was watching him, that wasn't why we were here.

"What did he tell you he was doing?" I demanded.

The buffalo turned his gaze to me. "What is the information worth to you?"

"You didn't just go there," Elias said.

"You don't understand the situation," I told the man. "I'm not paying for the information. The absolute best result you can expect is me to leave here satisfied you were used and weren't colluding with Wanna Be."

The man beamed. "I have something you want. So I have the power here."

I looked at the closest machine. The controls for the breathing assist that was keeping the man alive. The on/off switch was nicely marked. I flicked it off, then held the rhino by the neck as he came to turn it back on.

"In your research on my family, did you read up on one of my fathers? Arthur. I didn't get to meet him; he was murdered outside a child's hospital. So I read up on him." The man's eyes grew wide. He was already gasping for breath. "I have an affinity to learn stuff and as part of learning about my dead father, I read a good number of medical books. I'm no doctor myself, but I know enough to know which of these machines can hurt you the most if I turn it off. This one will kill you if I let it go on long enough." I flicked it back on and leaned in to look into the man's eyes. "So don't think you have anything resembling power here. I'm an Orr, I can live without getting what I want out of this meeting. You can't."

The man's fear was muted by weakness and pain. He might even think I couldn't see it. "You don't scare me."

I flicked the machine off again.

"Then you don't know my family as well as you think you do."

"Wyatt," Elias said. "You can't do this."

The smile I gave him wasn't pleasant. "I can, and I am. You knew what it might come to when you agreed to help."

"He's an old man. I have no problem with you doing anything you want to Wanna Be, but he's just someone who was used."

I flicked the machine back on and Elias thought he got through to me. The old man couldn't speak if he couldn't breathe.

"Rich folks aren't used, Elias, they use people."

The old man let out a weak laugh. "And here you are, using him."

"I am." He knew it. He might not understand how far I'd go, and if it got to be too much, he'd leave. I looked down at the buffalo. "You see, the big difference between you and my family is that we have no problem admitting to the kind of assholes we are. We're not worried about appearing nice. So when we are, we mean it. When we aren't. We're just being ourselves." I reached for the machine's switch. "I don't feel like being nice right now."

"Wait," the man said tone desperate.

I smiled. "Good. We finally understand each other." I let go of the rhino and he immediately swung at me. I had him on the floor and was standing before the rhino understood he was unconscious from his head impacting the hardwood. "So, Wanna Be?"

The old man looked like he'd try for a deal again, but as I reached for the switch, he said. "He told me his name was Steven Mullen. He's a jaguar. I didn't try to find out if it was his real name. He promised me a cure for this." He motioned to himself, the machine around them. "I'm

dying, have been for a long time.”

“And you believed him?” Elias asked.

“You wouldn’t?” the buffalo replied. “Have you looked around? Magic is real. Why wouldn’t I believe him?”

“There are others who offer proven methods.” He nodded to me.

“And become his family’s slave? I didn’t make it to where I am by bending over for other people.”

“No, you inherited your wealth,” I said. “He said he’d keep you from dying. I’m guessing you found out he lied to you when he just up and vanished after killing the boys.”

“He didn’t lie,” the buffalo said. “He’s still perfecting the process. That’s what he told me when he left. The police were starting to pay too much attention, and there’s only so much I can do to get them to look elsewhere.”

“He’s trying to perfect what, immorality?” Elias asked in disbelief.

I thought over the symbols, the ones in the building and the ones at the farmhouse. Eight years of evolution. It gave me an idea of where Wanna Be was heading with them, and they still made little sense. They weren’t aiming toward any symbols I recognized.

Of course, I’m not an expert on magic. But I do know one.

I checked the time, did the conversion. It was very early in Kenya. If I had the luxury, I’d call him directly. Instead, I call the palace.

“Odinga Residence,” an official sounding woman answered in Swahili.

“This is Wyatt Orr, of the San Francisco Orrs,” I answered in the same language. “Is the King available?”

“It is late here, Mister Orr.” She was still speaking Swahili, which told me she wasn’t pleased.

“I know, and I offer my sincerest apologies. If I was in a position to wait, I would have.”

“I will see if he is willing to speak with you.” Singing replaced her. I was on hold.

“Who are you calling?” Elias asked. The buffalo was watching me intently. Did he understand Swahili?

“Fred Odinga. If anyone can tell me if those symbols mean anything, it’s going to be him.”

“Wouldn’t the Thinkers know too?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t fucked any of the Thinkers I know.”

“You’ve had sex with the Kenyan king?”

I rolled my eyes. “I had sex with him before he was crowned. It’s only been ten years.”

“Wyatt?” the lion came over the phone. “Man, it’s been a while; how are you doing?” I made out moans and grunts, but they grew faint and realized he spoke English.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

“Nah, just resolving complaints between people. Frank can deal with them for a while. How can I help?”

“Can you look at some pictures for me and give me your professional opinion?”

“Send them.” I did, and a minute later, he spoke again. “What am I looking at?”

“I’m investigating a serial killer and he left those symbols behind. The ones in blood were under a month ago, the scratching was eight years.”

“I never took you for someone caring about stuff like this.”

“Obsidian Black put me on the trail and they wouldn’t have done that without a good reason.”

“Who?”

“Right, you wouldn’t know about them. They’re the hacker who took over for Emerald.”

“Wasn’t she one of Merlin’s people?”

“Yeah. No one’s sure who Black is, or even if they’re with Merlin or another faction. All I know is that they don’t bug me without reason. I know those aren’t sigils, but can they be symbols from another faction?”

“I don’t recognize them from anything I read, except for one.” I received a file. A zoomed section from the bloody wall at the farmhouse. “That looks a lot like a symbol I saw in a book years

ago. But it shouldn't be possible."

"Okay, the only times I've known you not to outright say something, it was really bad news."

"Do you remember the stories about Sahataan?"

"Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me."

"Look, it could be a coincidence. Sahataan is no more, we know that for sure."

"But someone took his place." Someone related to me on top of that.

"Yes, but Damian has never been seen on the earthly plane. He killed all of Sahataan's followers in his coup, which left him with no one to power him."

"But that doesn't mean he died. Our god starved for a long time, the way gods count time, before the Society found him. So it's possible I'm dealing with the fucking god of sacrifice?"

Fred didn't say anything, which made Elias's stare hard to ignore. He took out his phone, and I grabbed it out of his hand with a shake of the head. The glare he gave me was not happy.

Fred let out a breath. "Okay, dealing with gods screws up calculations, but it's one symbol among a lot that are nonsense. It's possible it's just luck. Or maybe your killer came across something online. A lot of junk appeared online after Diamond, and among all of it, there's a few gems. It's nearly impossible to prevent truth from finding its way now that people are actively searching for it. I miss the days when no one believed in magic."

"So your expert opinion," I said, fixing Elias with my gaze, "is that this isn't a sign Damian is involved."

"That's correct."

I raised an eyebrow and the otter nodded. I handed him back his phone. "Looking at what's there, do you think the guy's getting close to accomplishing what he set out to?"

"Set out to?" Fred is quiet. "No, that's basically meaningless... oh, you're with someone and you don't want him to realize..." He chuckled. "Man, I miss those days. But no, this is junk. The one thing you need to consider, and this is an outside chance on the same level as your uncle appearing next to you for a fuck. Is that if he's magical, his perseverance could empower what he's doing. Magic isn't science. The Hertz kid proved that it's possible to change what we think are laws of magic."

I glanced next to me before I could stop myself and shuddered at the idea Damian might be there. He might be related to me, but no one in my family thinks of him as such. Even before he made himself a god, my fathers had disowned him for taking over the gray church and going to war against us.

"Okay, I'll keep this in mind. Thanks, Fred. If you ever make it stateside, let me know, I'll make space in my bed for you and your brother."

"Yeah, if I can ever escape my palatial life, I will visit you." The next part was muffled by his hand. "You're the one insisting I need to stay here for my safety. I had no say in it, so don't be surprised if I look for a way out anytime you aren't fucking me." He was back. "Anyway, Frank's being an asshole again. I gotta go and plug it." He disconnected.

The buffalo couldn't hide his eagerness.

"You said he left," I said, putting my phone away, "did he say where he was going?"

"How close is he to succeeding?"

"That isn't how this works," I told him, smiling. "You want something, you have to pay for it. Where did he go?"

"He said there was something in Denver that would help him."

Denver. Why, oh why, wasn't I surprised? I nodded and leaned to his ear. "The guy conned you. He was never doing anything magical. He's just a sick bastard, and you're one too, for thinking anything is worth the life of children."

I reached for the switch as I watched the despair fill his face, then stopped. The news was destroying him. If I killed him, I was ending his suffering. The guy didn't deserve that mercy. I left him there.

"Denver," Elias said, once we were outside.

I nod. I had my reason to visit Eddy, but what were the odds I'd be able to avoid his father?

"I can go there with you."

I shook my head. "I doubt Bodenman will let you. That's Brislow territory."

"I thought the Cormorans were the official head of Colorado and the area."

"They are, but whoever runs security is who you have to worry about. In Colorado, that's the Brislow family. You know Bodenman is in their elder's bed, right?"

"Yeah, they go way back. From before there was a Brislow family is my understanding."

"He and my family have a history. We also have one with the Brislow. My visit there won't be fun."

"You guys are going to have sex. That sounds fun to me, no matter how angry it is."

I smiled. "It's the rest of my time there that isn't going to be fun."

At least Eddy would make a lot of that bearable.

New Mexico is annoying because of how much the temperatures swing from day to night. Nice and warm in the day, then fucking cold at night. Things used to be more stable, so I've read, before the climate change thing and the fixes that were put in place. The experts say that in a couple of decades we should be back to what used to be normal.

I got off my bike and raised the temperature on my jacket. I was a few hours north of Albuquerque, on the side of the I7, the Albuquerque-Salt Lake interstate. Somewhere south of me was La Jara, and north was Farmington.

Here? There was nothing.

But I had a signal, so I made the call. "Is this a joke?" I asked. The setting sun turned the already red sands into an almost blood color. Considering who I was looking for and the links I'd uncovered. It made me uncomfortable.

"No," the woman answered, "you asked me to do a search on the image you sent me. It came up in the historical records as a piece of stained glass art commissioned from Margaret Redmond in nineteen seventeen for the Santa Cruisez Church. It was delivered to an address I plotted to the GPS coordinates I gave you.

I looked around again. "There is nothing here, Beth."

"I don't know what to tell you, Wyatt. That's what the internet is giving me. We are talking about records that are over a hundred and fifty years old. Way before electronic records. Maybe you should just be happy there was something getting you where you are and not bitch about not landing exactly on your target."

"Yeah, yeah. Any chance you found more since you gave me this?"

"I'm not even going to point out you didn't pay me for more and tell you that no, nothing more on the church. Which tells me it wasn't active when the catholic church started digitizing all their active ones. If you're interested in the artist, I can give you more for not too much money."

"I'll pass." I took a second to consider other possibilities, then disconnected.

Having the best hackers working for my family was all great and good, until what I needed wasn't breaking into impossible to get into records, but information so esoteric, they wouldn't know what to do with it. That was where Beth came in. She's the hound of the internet. If there is something obscure to find, she's probably heard about it. If she hasn't, she knows how to get the information. And she's reasonably priced.

The picture I sent her was a drawing Eddy's father gave me when I left Eddy's bedroom the morning after confirming Enrique was magical. It was something abstract, supposed to be a sun if I had to guess. It was something he saw from Enrique when they were... I don't even have a word for what they might have done. The Elder has so many powers even the people trying to keep track can't, and I don't bother.

What Eddy's father told me was that the image was imprinted deep into the boy's mind and connected to what was done to him. He didn't know what it was, what it represented, or how Enrique had it when he couldn't remember what his kidnapper looked like.

Magic rarely gave straightforward answers, unfortunately.

Not having anything else I could do, I sent it to my family's hackers, who found nothing. I contacted a few experts and someone said old, possibly stained glass art. Then I sent it to Beth.

How would Enrique have had an image imprinted in his mind of something in another state

was yet another mystery. As far as anyone knew, he hadn't been taken out of Denver.

I put my helmet on, did a sweep with the variety of optics it was equipped with, and saw nothing out of the ordinary. It was made to see through weather conditions, not what was invisible. I climbed back on and rode south until I found a motel. This far out of any urban area, I considered myself lucky to have found even that under an hour's drive.

I spent the night alone trying to find information no experts could, because I needed something to take my mind off the empty bed.

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I was back on the side of the highway with the rising sun, and at least now the sand just looked red. I couldn't even find records of a town around here, definitely not a church. I switched the suspension to off-road mode and rode off the side and onto the sand.

I went west an hour, came back, then east, back again and north. On the way back south, I noticed tracks I'd missed before. Two parallel sets, wide with deep threads. A Jeep or another off-road truck with wheels designed for sand.

Traction was never a problem for me. I had magic for that.

I couldn't judge how old they were with any kind of certainty, but it was windy, so it couldn't take more than a few days for them to be covered? I could still make out the threads, so fresh. I followed them and a little more than thirty minutes later they went on a paved road and I lost them. I turned around. Somehow, I didn't think a paved road would take me to a no longer existing town where a church might stand.

The trail didn't lead to a church or even a building, but to the entrance to a cavern. I stopped next to the Jeep, something newer that had been through rough times. I identified some of the damage as bullet holes when I heard the hammer being pulled on a gun.

Yes, I know what those sound like. Too many people in my surroundings like old guns.

The woman holding the old revolver pointed at me was a massive donkey with a scowl on her face that would chase away anyone seeing it.

I didn't think I was going to be given that option.

"Take off the helmet, rich boy."

I moved my hands slowly. I can survive being shot. That doesn't mean I want it to happen.

"Good morning," I said once I was holding it.

She motioned for it, and I gently lobbed it at her. "Phone," she ordered

I took it out, locked it, and lobbed that at her too and winced when she stepped out of the way and it fell in the sand.

"Weapons."

"I don't have any."

She snorted. "You want me to strip search you?"

"Tell me there's a guy here to do it in your place and we can work something out."

She snorted again. "Jeb!" she yelled. An indistinct response comes from inside the cavern.

"Get your ass out here. We've got a problem."

"I'll be happy to leave if I'm too much of an inconvenience."

"You ain't going anywhere without your phone."

"That's true. So how about you give it back and Jeb doesn't have to stop whatever he's doing."

"And let you report us? I don't think so."

"I don't know what I'd report you for and—"

"This is protected land, jackass."

"—don't tell me." I sigh.

"So I ain't letting you go to report on the digging we're going."

"Who's he?" a deep voice asked, and I looked at the cavern's entrance. If she was massive, he was a monster. I licked my lips at the bulge in his pants. I kept my offer to myself. Better wait until I knew if he'd be receptive to it. With what was implied there, he was probably a top.

Now that would be a shame.

“Do I look like I’m on first-name basis with him?” she replied. “He’s probably with the natural protection bureau.”

“I’m not.” I didn’t even know that was a thing.

“Then some other fed.”

“I am definitely not one of those,” I replied and consider, for a second, mentioning how the FBI didn’t like me. It might not be a good idea to show they even knew I exist.

“Then what are you doing here?” he asked.

“I’m looking for an old church, in a town that was called Santa Cruizes.”

“You think I’m a moron?” she asked. “Santa Cruz’s is nowhere near here.”

“Not that one.”

“How did you find us?” he asked, and I pointed to the trail their Jeep left.

“You see tire tracks in the middle of nowhere and you follow them?” she asked suspiciously.

“I thought you might be locals with directions to where I want to go.” I was actually hoping it had been Wanna Be’s trail and I could finally end this, but I didn’t think they wanted to hear that either. Or that they’d believe it.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” the guy said.

“If I had precog, I would have known better.”

The two of them tensed, and I realized I might have said the wrong thing. There was a time when you could throw a comment like that, and people would nod because no one could do precognition. That was before magic was revealed to the world.

“You one of the magic types?”

“Which answer doesn’t get me shot?” I replied.

“Maybe we can use his help,” he said.

“Maybe he’s here to steal it from us.”

“Steal what?”

“You think I’m a moron and will tell you that?”

I didn’t point out she was who told me what I could report to the authority.

“Do you have something magic down there?”

“No,” she said vehemently.

“Maybe,” her brother countered. They were related. I’ve been on the receiving end of the glare she gave him often enough from one of my brothers to recognize it. At least I didn’t have to worry about getting in the middle of a couple if I made him an offer.

Right, I needed to remember that we weren’t the only ones doing the family love these days. Those two could still be lovers.

“Look. I don’t know that I can help you with whatever you have, but I can take a look.”

“Absolutely not,” she stated.

“Why not?” Jeb asked.

“Because if he wasn’t going to report us to the feds for being on protected land, he’s definitely going to do it for a magic artifact if he doesn’t steal it for himself.”

“So you put a bullet in his head once he’s done.”

I’d admire his pragmatism if I wasn’t on the receiving end of it. “Threatening me with death isn’t going to make me want to help you.”

He shrugged. “Then she kills you now.”

“Whoa! Slowdown!” I told her as she grinned. “Let’s talk about this.” A head shot, I wasn’t surviving without His intervention and I didn’t think I was that high on His list of people he watched over.

“So you’re going to help?” he asked.

“With some assurances I get to walk away from here afterward. I have family, you know.”

“Fine,” he said, “shoot him, Fiona.”

“Fine!” I yeld. “I’ll help. Fuck, would it kill you to be a little nicer? I didn’t leave San Francisco to feel like I was with my brothers again. Is she going to shoot me if I get off my bike? Or are you expecting me to stay straddled on it while you push me to where ever this thing is?”

"This is a bad idea, Jeb," Fiona said.

"At least it's an idea," he replied. "We didn't even have that five minutes ago."

She sighed and motioned for me to get off my bike. I kept my hands away from the bags in case she thought I was reaching for something. Then she motioned toward the cave.

Within a hundred feet, it was dark enough they turned on flashlights. Old ones, bulky. The kind that took large batteries to power and couldn't be recharged. Antique lovers?

"So, how did you end up down here?" I asked, to make conversation and try to build a rapport. They weren't closed off, but the only thing I got off them right now was determination and a desire to use the gun from her.

"Old family legend," Jeb said. He nodded to her. "My sister and me are from an old Pueblo family. We were around long before the land was taken from us. And there's a story about magic to retake it for ourselves."

"I used to teach history," she took over, "before the principal decided to cut cost and get a computers to do it. So I had access to a lot of old records and came across a traveling log with the description of a mountain that sounded a lot like that of the story."

"I used to work water wells, but that dried out. So neither of us had anything else to do. We figured we'd look for it until we found work."

"You didn't think it was real, did you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's just stories. Then we come across one reference point after the other from the journal, and we make it here. The cave was covered, so I got dynamite from the old work site to open it, and we came down and..."

"You found something."

"Yeah," she said. "Something that's going to make us rich."

We went down as they talked, the light from their torch the only illumination. As the awe in her voice registered, my hackles went up. Not at her, but at a sense that was building as we continued to advance. They were right. There was magic down there. I could feel it.

It takes a lot of magic for one of us to sense what's from another faction. That's the only thing I could tell. This wasn't His magic.

How cool would it have been if I'd found another one of his Hearth? After the one in Antarctica was disclosed, there's been this race to find the next unknown Hearth. It isn't realistic that there'd be another one, but hope springs eternal even among us magic folks.

"What do the stories say the magic is?" I asked, slowing enough Fiona grabbed and pulled me.

"Power," she said.

"What kind of power?" I asked. "There's a lot of flavors of them and there are some you don't want to touch unless you know what you're doing."

"Which is where you come in," Jeb said.

"Yeah, about that. Sex magic is what I do." She looked me over with interest. "My knowledge of the rest is basic at best and only academic. I know a handful of people from other factions, but I don't know how useful I'll be."

"I'm sure Fiona will find a use for you," Jeb said.

"No, she won't. I'm gay."

"Oh, I can be very convincing," she said.

"Trust me, there's no convincing you can do that's going to get through the way my magic works. It's guys or nothing."

"So you've never tried a girl?"

I stared at her. Was she not listening? "Oh, Balls. You're like my brother. You get one idea in your head, and there isn't any space left for either common sense or reason." We turned a corner and whatever she answered was forgotten as I gaze at what was before us.

The stone was easily twenty feet tall. The base roughly circular, the top rounded. A bit of work and it could be a dildo to please Him if he manifested himself here. There were forms carved on it and as I watched, they move. Slithered around.

“Do you see them move?” Jeb asked.

“Yeah, and anything powerful enough to act on its own is not something you want to mess with.”

“You have to touch it,” she said.

“No, I don’t,” I replied.

She put the gun against my side and smiled, urging me toward it with the muzzle.

“Look, me touching it isn’t going to help.” I take a reluctant step toward it. This close, the bullet would go through the jacket.

“It’s magic. You’re magic. It’s like a key and a lock,” she said.

My fur stood on end enough for the two of them to notice and look at their own to see if they were reacting to the magic. They weren’t. Normal people aren’t immune to magical effects, but they aren’t attuned to it. This was pure magical power radiating out from the stone dildo. Anymore attuned to it and I’d probably explode.

We were before it. There was a smell to the magic from this close. Sulfur and ash. It wasn’t just the forms on the surface that were slithering about. The stone itself seemed to undulate in places.

“Touch it,” Fiona ordered.

“I would really rather not.” Touching other faction’s magic wasn’t usually a problem, but this level of energy? Eddy likes to talk about when his dad tried to grab a powerful artifact from one of the other factions, way back when. Eddy was like three at the time, and he was sore for weeks afterward. No amount of sex helped.

The hammer ratcheted back. “It’s that or a big hole in your side.”

I raised my hand, and the undulations moved toward it; as if hoping I’d press my hand against its imprint on the other side of a window.

I froze and looked at the whole thing over. Fuck. It was a container of some sorts. I looked at the form before my hand, which looked eerily like a hand too, but with only three fingers.

It was a prison.

Holy fuck. Someone used a shit load of power to imprison something. There was no way I was touching that.

She grabbed my hand and slammed it against the stone before I could react.

I always believed I knew what pain was. My family is skilled at inflicting it, on purpose and not.

I would take everything my fathers accidentally inflicted on me. Everything my brothers purposely made me suffer to no longer have to remember what coursed through me at that very moment.