

Chapter 15

Paul looked out the window of the hotel at the white nothingness.

There was only white on the other side of the pane, and the cold seeped in slightly.

He couldn't wrap his mind around the idea there was a snowstorm outside the window in June. Sure, this was Iceland, but it was also in the northern hemisphere, so it was summer here too. Not to mention there had been no hints of bad weather when they'd landed the previous evening.

This was not what he'd expected to wake up to.

Breakfast, since he'd made sure his phone was on local time. Then wait for Donal to find out where Grant and Thomas were. Instead, as soon as he'd gotten out of bed and the squirrel was done looking him over, Donal had pointed to the window while nibbling on an egg.

"How is this possible?" Paul asked, and immediately felt foolish.

Magic, of course. And if magic was going to show up the morning after they'd landed, that could only mean one thing.

But how had the Chamber tracked them? There was his phone, but he'd heeded Shila's warnings and not contacted anyone. He'd read the chat messages, but would that let the Chamber hack him?

Donal had made talismans to keep anyone from easily tracking the two of them, but electronic magic had been the pangolin's specialty. If the Chamber had an electronic staff of their own, which magic would win?

It took his phone off the charging stand and looked for a way to remove the back. He'd never had to, so he couldn't remember if his was a model where the battery could be removed. He didn't want to take a chance he was—

Red furred hands stopped him. "No need for anything drastic," Donal said, suddenly before the naked golden tiger. "We aren't there yet."

"I wasn't—" Paul noticed the squirrel was looking down between them and licking his lips. "Donal," he said cautiously. "Do you mind stepping out of my personal space?"

The squirrel's head snapped up, ears folding back in embarrassment. "Sorry." He stepped back without letting go of Paul's phone or hand.

Paul wondered if he should suggest Donal postpone the search for Grant until after he'd gone to a club and spent the sexual energy he had?

"Don't jump to the conclusion this is happening between us—I mean, because of us." He let go of Paul and motioned to the window.

"It seems sort of coincidental." He placed the phone down and considered dressing.

"Only the timing." Donal took his phone off the table and showed Paul the weather map. The storm covered half of Iceland. "I'm not going to claim there isn't a staff out there which, in the right hands, can't do this, since I'm not Grant and I don't know all the staves out there, but I don't think anyone within the Chamber has the kind of connection to their staves that would let them do this overnight." He swiped to a muted video of a man motioning to a projected map of weather patterns. The dates showed this progressing over the last week.

"The cold snap caught them by surprised, but otherwise, it's progressing the way normal weather works around here."

"Only it isn't, right? Not with Grant and Thomas in the area."

Donal nodded. "They've had the Chamber after them for a while. This could be because they are closing in."

"Do you think Shila's call to Grant is why?"

The squirrel shrugged. "No way to know. All we can do is deal with the way things are."

Paul chuckled bitterly. "And, because of the way things have been going, you mean we need to find out where in the whole of Iceland the two of them are, before the Chamber does. Because we don't have the kind of luck that makes it do they are in the city, do we?"

Donal nodded. "We're going to have to drive to where they are."

Paul stared out the window. "Drive in that?"

The squirrel nodded.

"Tell me you have the money that's going to let us rent whatever they used to drive in these kinds of conditions."

* * * * *

Donal didn't.

Neither did Paul.

They had bought winter clothing. The hotel's store always had some on hand for tourists nervous about changing weather, and with the storm, they'd move some from the basement storage and onto display racks.

Paul kept his complaining to a minimum as he pushed through the whiteout. He was from Minnesota. He knew cold. But these last years in San Francisco Bay had gotten him used to a warmer climate.

Donal stayed close to him and led him to only the squirrel knew where.

Or, considering how Donal's staff worked, he might not even know that. Finding lost and hidden things implied a lack of knowledge as to where they were. Donal paused by what Paul thought was a snowbank, or it might be a snow covered house, for all he could tell in the white on white they were moving through. Half of him vanished into the loose snow and when he reemerged, he held something.

Paul wanted to ask what he'd found, but he worried the gale wind would shove so much snow in his mouth he'd choke on it.

Then there was something cutting the wind down, but before Paul could ask, Donal opened the door to a vehicle and climbed in. Paul followed once the squirrel moved over and found himself seated behind the wheel of a rugged SUV. Donal offered him a wallet with something dangling out of it.

That was clearly not a phone. Paul couldn't even find a slot for one on the dash. How did this thing start? He took the wallet and turned it in his hand. Was this a talisman Donal had made?

"The key goes in the ignition." Donal chuckled at Paul's incomprehension. "The key's the thing dangling out. The narrow part with the teeth goes in, with the flat aimed toward the center of the grove."

Paul looked studied the piece of metal attached to the leather wallet by a string. It reminded him of the electronic key that had been his backup way of unlocking his apartment door, but it didn't have teeth like this. He searched the dash for where it inserted.

Donal chuckled again.

"You're welcome to sit on this side and deal with this," Paul said, still looking.

"It's been years since I've driven anything. The ignition is on the steering column. It's round and protruding. The slot for the key will be on the top."

"How do you know about these?" Paul found what the squirrel meant as soon as he looked at the column. He slipped the key in and... nothing. When he looked at Donal, his lips were tight with an effort not to smile. "Okay, now what?"

It took a few extra seconds before the squirrel spoke. "Turn it." A chuckle escaped. "And I know about them because they used to be how you started every vehicle."

Paul turned it, and a series of explosions sounded, shaking the SUV. He let go of the key in surprise, but they kept going.

He glared at the squirrel, ready to shut down any laughter, but Donal was holding on to the dash, looking fearful. "I thought you know about these."

"Read about them." He swallowed. "Libraries are places to go to when it gets cold. Lots of time to read there. I looked into one when I was a kid, but never rode one. This is how they used to be powered, before the switch to electric."

"So, this is normal?" No wonder the switch had happened. "Why do they still have something this backwards here?"

Donal let go of the dash. "The fuel used is more reliable than batteries at low temperature. You ever read the warning that comes with every car about removing an hour from the driving range for every ten degrees below thirty? Fuel vehicles don't have that problem. Also, this one is designed to be used in weather like this."

"And you just happened to find its keys?" Paul placed his hands on the steering wheel. The way it

vibrated, even though they weren't moving, was unnerving.

Donal shrugged. "It's summer. They probably didn't expect to need it and didn't realize they'd misplaced the key. So you might want to get us moving. I expect they're not going to be happy if they find us sitting in it."

"We could explain why we need it." They wouldn't have to steal it.

The squirrel's incredulous expression made Paul reconsider. Exactly what explanation would he give? We need to go look for friends who are somewhere out there. No, we don't know where. Yes, this will probably involve driving aimlessly until that happens. You understand, don't you?

He pressed accelerator and was surprised the wheels didn't spin needlessly. They lurched ahead and slowly made their way onto the deserted road.

"Where to?" Paul asked, accelerating.

Donal looked at his phone and pointed left. "We need to get on the forty-nine to leave the city."

Again, Paul was impressed with the traction as he made the turn. He'd driven cars built for Minnesota winders, and they slid all over the place before finding traction at the slightest sharp motion.

"And once out of the city? Any idea?"

Donal shook his head. "I'm hoping they got lost in the storm."

"Donal, you do remember Thomas can teleport, right? How is a teleporter ever lost?" He caught the worry in the squirrel's eyes before he it was covered up. But just as Paul wondered if he'd shot too large a hole in Donal's plan, he smiled.

"They're not lost. They're hiding. They're hiding from the Chamber, and the Chamber wouldn't spend the energy to keep a storm like this going if they'd found them."

Paul considered it.

Okay, if he was going to hang all his hopes on something, this wasn't half bad.