

The flashing lights came on behind me as I entered Pickering. I changed lanes to get out of his way, and the car followed me. Resigned, I pull off onto the shoulder, and the OPP car parked behind me.

I took off my helmet and watched the squirrel exit the car in my mirror. He strode toward me his face was hard. This was a man on a mission, who took his job seriously.

“Officer,” I greeted him.

“License and Registration,” he replied.

“What is this about?” I asked, handing them to him.

He looked them over and walked back to his car.

I kept watching in my mirror as he scanned my license. This was unusual, not that I was worried. I wasn’t wanted in Canada. I had been driving twenty kilometers over the limit, so I’d probably end up with a speeding ticket. He spoke with someone; I needed to learn to read lips.

He stepped out of his car, walked to me. “I need you to follow me.”

“What’s this about?”

“Just follow me, and it’ll get resolved.”

Another thing to put on my list, read up on Canadian law. I knew US law. Everyone in my family does to one degree or another, if only from sitting listening to a lawyer go over how we screwed up. Even when you paid them off, they always wanted you to know what laws you’d broken and how, for some reason. Drove Wade insane after he read the entire law library. I just skimmed it.

My license and registration were still in his car, so there was no getting it, not unless I wanted to cause a lot of trouble. I looked for some kind of ID I could use when I called his superior. He didn’t have an exposed badge, and his microphone covered all but his first initial, ‘G’ and the last letter of his last name, ‘n’. It almost felt like he did it on purpose.

“Lead the way,” I told him. Whatever this was about, once we were at the precinct, I could call MM&J and let them deal with it.

After ten minutes on the 401, I worried. The OPP had to have a precinct around where he stopped me, so why the long ride? If he was taking me to some central bureau, this was more than a random stop.

I preemptively placed the call.

“Malek, Malek, and Juniper,” A feminine voice answered, “How may I direct your call?”

“Gilberto Alvares,” I replied.

There was a click. “Alvares,” a man said, sounding distracted.

“Gilberto, Wyatt Orr.”

“Mister Orr, how can I help you?” He was alert now. We’ve only been dealing with MM&J for twenty years, but in that time, my fathers had lost it on them often enough they knew to treat us with reverence. MM&J has been the law firm the Society has used for as long as there has been a Society; they’ve known about magic longer than anyone. They are a lot easier to deal with than the old family firms, since I don’t have to dance around any issues.

“Have any of my brothers screwed up in Canada recently?”

“Not that I’m aware of, I’m checking now. No, there are no Canadian warrants on anyone in your family.”

“Can you see anything that would explain why an OPP officer took my license and is having me follow him to I don’t know where?”

“No, sir. As I said, there is nothing on record pertaining to you or your family that would explain this. I can contact someone within the Canadian judicial system. It might be too recent, or something they are keeping off the record.”

“Do that and have someone local ready in case I need representation. I’m not liking this.” I disconnected.

The only thing I could think that might have the Canadian system coming down on me was Aaron’s drug running, but as far as I knew, he was careful, and we didn’t run anything through

Canada because until now we didn't have an entry point we could trust. Yeah, yeah, I just told you what part of the deal with the Carbonneau involved.

Another ten minutes and we were exiting on the Don Valley Parkway, then it was off on Lawrence, heading west, and a few minutes later the real estate value went way up. What were we doing in a rich neighborhood? We turned on a smaller street and the visible mansions were even larger and more expensive. He turned into a long driveway and I followed him, now curious as to what was going on.

He stopped just past the walkway to the mansion's door, and I stopped behind him. The squirrel exited the car as the door to the mansion opened and another squirrel walked toward us. He was older, fit, wearing a light jacket and gray slacks.

"Thank you, Gary," the man said to the OPP officer. "I'll take it from here."

Without a word, Gary headed back to his car. I whistled loudly as he was about to close his door. He looked out at me.

"You leave with my license, and I will hunt you down."

And the squirrel looked to his Elder before doing anything.

"Please return whatever you took from Mister Orr, Gary," the man who I now knew was Douglas MacDonald, said.

Gary handed me my license and registration and went back to his car.

"Mister Orr, it is such a pleasure to meet you," the elder said, offering me his hand. He was pleased, although I could tell he was controlling other emotions. "I'm Douglas MacDonald."

I put my license away, then the registration, before turning to him and ignored his hand. "You never heard of a phone?"

"But it's so easy to ignore a phone call," he replied, the smile not wavering, but his anxiety going up a notch, "when I was informed someone from your family was in Ontario, I just had to make sure we got to meet. I'm afraid that the previous time your family came through, my uncle was Elder, and he wouldn't let us meet any of them."

That hadn't been during our family trip to Quebec. We drove through Toronto without stopping. I didn't know of any other trip here, but I wasn't told everything.

"That would be more believable if you'd at least tried to call me. I'm the one guy in my family whose number is online."

"But if I had, and you'd decided you weren't interested in meeting, you might have gone to greater length to avoid my grandson." He motioned to the mansion. "Why don't we go inside? The weather's mild for us, but I'm sure you'll be more comfortable indoors."

*Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly.*

I considered his invitation. Of course, this fly had claws. I could turn him down hard. But this could be the innocent 'want to get to know your' meeting he wants me to believe it was. I might as well go along until I had a reason to leave forcefully. I grabbed my phone and hooked my helmet on the bike's handle.

The mansion was, well, a mansion. Marble floors, high ceilings, walls made of some sort of stone, paintings of family members. Exotic trees.

"Have you eaten?" Douglas asked, leading me deeper.

"Not yet." If he was offering food, I was not turning it down.

"You're in luck, Nick's on cooking duties today. He makes an amazing lasagna." He opened the door to the kitchen and a lot of enticing smells escaped.

A twenty-something squirrel wearing only an apron was working dough on the island. Douglas greeted him in the Society way, which is to say hands went where isn't proper in public, and moans and groans were exchanged. Only the younger one did the groaning and moaning as he was careful not to put his dough covered gloved hands on his elder, although he did kiss him passionately.

"Nick, say hello to Mister Orr."

"Hey," the squirrel said.

I nodded in return. "Call me Wyatt." I didn't offer my hand to shake or do anything else. Until I knew what this was about, I wasn't getting distracted by the mostly naked squirrel.

“What do you have in the oven?” Douglas asked, reaching for the door.

“Dinner,” Nick answered, putting his tail in his elder’s face to move him away.

“I was hoping to get Wyatt to taste your lasagna.”

“Then he’ll have to stay for dinner. If you want lunch, there’s soup on the stove, it’s been simmering for a few hours, it should be ready. Minestrone,” Nick told me.

“I’m good with soup.”

“There’s also bread from last night, and cheeses in the fridge, if you want that with it.”

Douglas took bowls from the cabinets. “What took you to Quebec, Wyatt?” he filled them.

“Doing the tourist thing,” I answered, sitting at the island.

“What did you think? Quebec’s a beautiful city, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I love walking around Old Quebec. There’s a lot of history there.”

Douglas placed a board with a bunch of cheeses. “Yes, Quebec is definitely one of Canada’s gems.”

There we go, I thought, popping a piece of cheeses in my mouth.

“Did you have the chance to visit the Frontenac Castle?” He asked, putting thick slices of rustic bread on the island.

“You already know I did, don’t you?”

He shrugged, placing a glass of red wine before me. “I’m being polite.”

“You need to work on it.” I dunked a slice of bread in the soup and ate it.

Douglas stiffened.

“Good bread,” I told Nick in the silence.

“Matt baked it,” the younger squirrel replied, looking uncomfortable.

“Let him know it’s really good.” I ate a spoon full of soup. “And the soup’s amazing.” Nick’s ears turned red, but he looked like he wanted to be elsewhere. “By the way, Doug, if you want to be polite, you should start by respecting the name of places, it’s called Le Chateau Frontenac, not Castle.”

“My name is Douglas,” the elder squirrel stated, “and since you wish to dispense with the pleasantries, maybe you can tell me what Rene wanted with you?”

“Sorry, family business.”

Nick looked at me, horrified, as I dropped pieces of cheese in the soup and swirled them around

“Mister Orr, I don’t think you understand the situation. Canada isn’t like your country. We aren’t a bunch of independent states, each doing their own thing. We are unified, We will not abide Quebec going off in its—”

“They’re not looking to separate,” I said before spooning a cheesy glob into my mouth.

The news surprised Douglas. “Then why would they want to see you?”

I shrugged, finishing the bowl and scraping the cheese that’d ended up stuck to the bottom.

“Mister Orr, I can’t have you interfering in how my country’s run.”

“That’s fine. I have no interest in getting in the way.” I downed the wine.

Douglas looked at me suspiciously. “You spent three hours in Rene’s office. Don’t expect me to believe the two of you didn’t reach some form of agreement against me.”

“What do you want, Doug?” I speared a slice of cheese with a claw.

“I want your assurance that you will not get involved in my country’s business.”

“That, I can’t give you. You don’t represent all the families in this country. If one of them wants to do business with my family, I will listen, and negotiate on my fathers’ behalf. You want to negotiate with us about something, I’ll listen, but if you want to get my family to agree to some unilateral action, you’re going to have to speak with my Elder.

Douglas wasn’t happy. “Are you certain I can’t convince you to reconsider your position?”

“Elder MacDonald—” I decide to be polite this time— “what kind of family would we be if we could be bought? You all seem to forget that we didn’t buckle under the Gray Church when all of you cowered from them. You think that if something as paltry as money or favors could sway us, the Church wouldn’t have found something we wanted they could give us? If you want something

from the Carbonneau family, negotiate with them, because my family will not renege on any arrangement we have reached.”

I popped a last slice of cheese in my mouth as I stood. “Nick.”

The squirrel startled at being addressed.

“The soup was really good. I’m sorry I won’t be able to stay to taste your lasagna.”

“We are not done, Mister Orr,” Douglas said.

“We are, Elder. I’ve told you my position. What you want isn’t something I can give you. You need to speak with my father.”

“The Carbonneau are only one family, Mister Orr, you’d do well to remember that.”

I smiled. “I will never forget that one family, sufficiently determined, can do what an entire society will not, Elder MacDonald.” I turned and left.