

Chapter 01

Minneapolis, January 13th

Thomas stopped running and leaned against the large advertising panel, hoping it would block the howling January wind that sent more snow up from the ground than the sky was dumping on them.

He hugged himself, wishing he'd grabbed a jacket before bolting out of the bedroom. Jeans, his faded 'Shot-em Down' t-shirt, and shoes were not how to dress for a snowstorm in Minneapolis.

He also wished he knew how he'd bolted.

He shuddered as he remembered catching the reflection as Henry hugged him. The open mouth, the fangs about to bite his neck.

Fuck. He knew in the original vampire story vampires were bats, but did the bat have to play it up to that creepy level.

If that had been the only creepiness in the last few hours, Thomas might have been able to laugh it off, but there had been his blackout in the kitchen, as he and Yating were fucking—there had been a flash of light, heat. The knowledge it was the pot of oil on the stove he's been making funnel cakes with. Then he'd woken to being fucked by just about every guy in the frat. Their crazy talk of them initiating him, of needing Henry.

And then they'd left him. Locked him in his room to wait for the bat.

So, instead of laughing off the vampire act, Thomas blacked out and he'd found himself on the other side of the room, a confused Henry looking around for him. Smiling as something occurred, then his talk of letting him take it all away. When the bat had walked in his direction, Thomas had looked for an escape. The bedroom door was closed, of course, it was closed, the plan had been to have sex, and unlike most of the other times in the frat, the house leader had closed the door behind them.

Feeling trapped, Thomas had glanced at the closed window, where he could see the other side of the road, and wished his room had been on the ground floor because jumping through the glass would have been preferable to the crazy the bat was then spouting.

And he'd blacked out and came to besides that same lamp post he'd been looking toward without any idea how he'd gotten out of the room, of the frat house, or why Henry had been at the bedroom's window looking out, searching.

Before Thomas had fully taken it in, the door to the building burst open with someone he couldn't make out clearly to tell more than they were pointing in his direction. Thomas had started running and hadn't looked back.

Now, he was somewhere on East River Parkway, freezing, and being hunted for... well, probably to be the bat's meal or something.

Fuck, Vampires weren't real.

Right?

At least he hadn't blacked out again.

What he needed was somewhere warm.

No, what he needed was to get on the next bus and head home.

He reached in his pocket and was horrified not to find his phone there, thinking he'd lost it in his mad run. It had been in the kitchen with him when he'd blacked out and no one had brought it to him afterward.

He cursed. No phone meant no way to pay the bus fare.

Had his life turned into enough of a porno that he could blow the driver for passage?

"There!" someone yelled, and Thomas turned in that direction in surprise. He made out a badger and a collie rounding the intersection.

Thomas took off in the opposite direction. The collie was Hubert, which meant that the badger had to be Jacques since those two spent enough time together to qualify being attacked at the hips. There had been another one but he'd only made out an expensive well tailors overcoat.

Still enough to work out who that was and to wonder why he was running after him, of everyone in the frat Felix was the one who definitely had no love for the rat. Not that Thomas understood why any of them were chasing him. Blacking out after the creepy house leader tried to bite you didn't warrant this.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw a fourth figure running after him, and all of the catching up. All he could tell about that one was that it wasn't Chima. The hyena was an adonis, so impossible to miss, and of everyone in the frat the only one he knew to be a runner, so his absence was a good thing.

He made out the shape of a bridge through the snow and had an idea. The Green Line had a stop on Washington. It would be warmth and people he could lose himself among. He pushed himself, hoping the exertion would keep him warm too.

The bridge was more defined now. Enough he could make out the covered pedestrian section. Yes, how had he forgotten about that? It wasn't exactly heated, but it would cut the wind and snow and—

"I see him," Firmin's familiar voice came from ahead of him.

No! He couldn't be stopped now with the bridge and his escape so close.

He collided with someone, and she was the only reason they didn't both end up on the ground.

"Are you okay?" she asked, steadying him as Thomas tried to figure out where she'd come from. There had been no one on the sidewalk between him and the group of his Frat brothers who had been with Firmin.

"I didn't see you," she said, chuckled. "It's like you came out of nowhere."

Thomas was steady on his feet now, but out of breath. He felt like he'd been running for a lot longer than he had. But he had to keep going. Staying still let the others catch up to him and if Hubert got his hand on him, Thomas wasn't getting away. The collie was way stronger than he looked.

He took a step, looking for the others, and stopped.

He wasn't on the street, he was on the bridge. "How?" he looked to the ends. He seemed to be closer to the east side, and running all that way would explain why he was exhausted, but he hadn't....

Had he blacked out another time?

"It's easy to miss someone in this snow," she said. She looked at him. "Are you okay?" the concern was clear on her face. Maybe she would lend him her phone and he could call Paul. The golden tiger would pick him up and only ask questions once they were at Thomas's parent's house.

Only, he didn't know his number. It had always been just a screen tap away. Same with his parents.

Standing still also let the cold settle back under his fur.

"Had to leave in a hurry," he said and added over his shoulder as he took off. "Sorry."

What had he done for his life to become so insane the Sigma Theta Gamma house leader tried to bite him? Henry had always been a necker, but that was too much.

"When you joined the frat," he muttered under his breath, shouldering the door to the covered part of the pedestrian walkway. "Duh."

Only the only reason he'd joined the supposedly exclusive frat was that he'd been convinced to join by Limbani. The monkey had been insistent, even convincing the house leader to let someone who didn't belong to any of the approved families join. Thomas had been looking for a way to leave his parent's house while at university, so he'd accepted.

The idea he'd be around all those guys and have sex all the time was also an incentive.

Except, the invitation had only come as a result of Thomas attending that first party. And he'd only attended that because of the booth that same monkey and Laurence had been at, promoting the party, on Rush week.

That was it, going there was why his life was crazy right now.

Wait. Did this mean all this was Paul's fault?

Chapter 02

Minneapolis, September 2nd

"I can't take this anymore," Thomas exclaimed as he and the golden tiger walked out of the parking lot. "Every time I think I'll get a moment of peace, bam, there he is. It's getting to the point where I jump anytime I walk by another rat in the halls." He glared at his friend as Paul chuckled. "I'm serious. If I'm going to deal with him at school, I can't also live under my father's roof. I was up two hours early, hoping to have some time to myself, but he was already moving around the house. He never sleeps!"

The tiger rolled his eyes. "I was there picking you up, remember? And what are you complaining about? Your father wasn't hounding your steps. It's your brother he was loading in the car. Roland didn't even look awake. Don't be so hard on your father. He's only looking out for you." Paul motioned around them, to the booths on The Knoll's lawn, and the buildings behind them. "University is a big step."

It was Thomas's turn to roll his eyes. "I got in with him hovering over me like a spy drone. He could trust me not to crash and burn, you know."

Paul's tone became overly formal. "And how is settling you your major coming long, Mister Hertz? Shall we expect a decision to be reached before, or after the end of the year?"

Thomas winced and looked around. "Don't do that. You act like a teacher speaking to me like that and he's going to appear out of nowhere."

Paul shook his head. "I'm sure you aren't the only student taking up his time. But knowing what your major is would make picking a fraternity easier."

"Unlike you, Paul, I didn't load up on AP courses, so I have more than enough general classes to get through to let me delay the decision until way later."

"But a major gives you and the frat something in common, makes living with them easier." Paul stepped away from Thomas. "And on that note, I'll be right back."

Thomas watched his best friend head for a lemming handing out pamphlets for Alpha Chi Sigma. As they spoke, Thomas looked around at the booths.

Alpha Chi Sigma was a biochem-related frat because that was what Paul was on the accelerated path to. And the beakers and periodic table at part of the banner. Looking further, Thomas saw one where the students were in lab coats with stethoscopes around their necks. Another possibility for Paul,

One was related to mechanical engineering, with lots of machines on display. Another looked more like it was manned by business representatives in finely pressed suits than a frat looking to attract students to them.

His perusing was interrupted as a couple passed by, a muscular bear and curvy lioness, both in tight-fitting sportswear. He didn't want to stare, but he also wasn't the only one.

He envied her a little. The guy looked like he belonged on the football team.

Thomas touched his left eye, the thought bringing back the cost he'd paid for kissing the high school quarterback during the prom. If that kind of reaction hadn't turned Thomas off that body type, nothing would.

"I'm glad you aren't letting such an opportunity go to waste," Paul said, suddenly next to him.

Thomas fixed his gaze on his friend, then, with a motion in the retreating couple's direction. "Have you looked at him?"

Paul managed a simultaneous nod and shrug. "He is definitely an exemplary specimen." He paused, contemplated something, and looked at Thomas. "Have you kissed him yet?"

"It's pretty obvious he's with someone."

"That didn't stop you from that kiss at Prom."

Thomas rubbed his temple. "And after that, I swore to never accept one of Nathan's dares. Also, I had six cups from the punch, and it had to have been spiked."

Paul leaned in and whispered in Thomas's ear. "If you aren't taking Nathan's anymore, do you want me to dare you to kiss him?"

Thomas jumped away, startled. "Don't you dare. You're the level-headed one of the group. Don't start causing shit just because Nathan decided New York City was more worthy of him than the Twin Cities."

Chuckling, Paul placed his arm over Thomas's shoulders and got him walking again. "College is about

expanding your horizons.” The tiger pointed. “What about them?”

Thomas looked at the two there. “The gorilla’s kind of on the thin side, but he has good posture. The corgi could be a case of good things in small...” he trailed off when he noticed what they stood in front of. “You mean the frat, don’t you?”

With a laugh, Paul took out his phone. “Let me check something. Maybe there a fray for people who can’t make up their mind.” He Paused. “But wouldn’t that require them to make up their mind to form it in the first place?”

“I can make up my mind,” Thomas replied, trying, and failing, not to sound like he was whining. “It’s just that picking a major is a major decision.” He stopped as what he said sunk in. “Not one word,” he told the grinning tiger.

“Trust me.” Paul took his arm off the shoulders and was typing again. “I don’t have to say anything to repeat what you just said to Donna.” With a chuckle, the tiger danced away from the rat’s attempts at grabbing the phone.

When he showed Thomas the screen, it stopped the rat. Instead of the app, their group used to chat, it was the page for a frat.

“Didn’t you even look up which frats are around the UMn?” Paul asked. “A little research would have gone a long way since you knew we were coming here.”

Thomas did a quick read of what this frat was about then gave the tiger a humorless laugh. “A research fraternity. How clever. You realize one of those will almost certainly have an arrangement with my father, who is part of the science teachers, that would let him just at me out of the shadows.” He pushed the phone back to Paul. “No thanks. I’m just happy he was too busy planning Roland’s football career to notice I was planning on coming here. If my father realized I was considering a frat, I would have gotten all the sales pitch for them back home, along with his rating on which ones he considers the best and all that.”

Paul was typing now, and Thomas knew he wasn’t being ignored simply by the roll of the eyes the tiger gave him.

“I’m serious. He got himself assigned as my adviser and he has my entire course load planned not just for these two semesters, but he’s already booked my entire summer, not one, both summer semesters.”

“I guess you’re going to be done with the general education part faster than you think.”

Thomas glared at his best friend and continued once the smirk went away. Paul kept typing, pausing only when he glanced in his direction and saw the look on the rat’s face.

“You know your dad’s only doing this because he wants you to succeed, right?”

Thomas narrowed his eyes even more. “Don’t take his side, Paul, or I might revoke your best friend status. He was supposed to have gotten the helicopter parenting out of his system with Judith and Victor. I have no idea how either of them survived all that stifling.”

“Maybe they were where he trained for you,” Paul said, attention back to his phone. “And maybe you’re training for when your brother will get to college.”

“Roland’s getting a football scholarship, unless Dad’s regiment has him bypass that and lands him in the major leagues right out of high school. I wouldn’t put it past that man to be aiming for that.” Thomas sighed. “That or it’s going to kill him before he graduates. I can just see our matching gravestones, side by side. Taken too young. Smothered by Fatherly Love.”

When Paul kept on looking at his phone, Thomas grumbled. “You transcribed my rant to Donna, didn’t you, now she’s commenting on it.”

The golden tiger shook his head. “I’m looking for a fraternity that was recommended to me while in the chemistry study hall, but I haven’t seen them here, so I’m crowdsourcing the answer.”

“You can’t find a frat you’re interested in?” Thomas asked suspiciously.

“It’s not for me.” He smiled as he read something, then looked around. Before the rat could push for details, Paul grabbed his hand and pulled him along.

Thomas wondered just what frat his best friend could think would be good for him, as the signs and paraphernalia on display in the booth they passed became less academia related and more... could a frat just be about being a frat? The only things on the signs were the names of the frats, some has jackets with the Greek letters embroidered on them. Thomas had always thought frat houses had to have a theme.

When Paul slowed close to a plain table manned by two smoking hot guys, Thomas figured they were getting close.

He eyed the lean monkey who was looking around, and Thomas was sure he’d encountered him before. The buff armadillo was speaking with a lion, gazing into his eyes and stroking a hand over the fur on the lion’s arm. The armadillo leaned in, whispered something to the lion, who jerked away and walked off stiffly.

The monkey laughed, then suddenly stopped, just as Thomas realized they weren't almost to their destination. This booth was their destination.

"You're here!" the monkey exclaimed. He turned to the armadillo. "When will you stop doubting me? I said he'd come, and here he is." Thomas couldn't place the accent. But he was focusing on his face. The brown so dark it was nearly black that transitioned into the white crest of fur around it should make him memorable, but even with that, Thomas still wasn't sure where he'd seen him before.

Said armadillo didn't seem to be listening, looking the golden tiger up and down in appreciation.

Thomas looked away from the monkey to the booth, well, table, to get a sense of what frat they were, but it was only the table, a white cloth over it, with a tablet in a heavy-duty metal case and display of pamphlet. By the time he noticed they didn't have the name of the frat on display, he was looking at the monkey again, he was standing so close they could kiss.

"Woe, there," Thomas said, taking a step back and froze. Kissing. "I remember you."

"You do? The monkey asked in surprise, the pursing of his lips going slack. Even Paul and the armadillo were looking at him, curious."

"He was in our Freshman orientation tour, Paul, you remember him. Him and..." Thomas tried to pull who the other guy had been. "And a margay were pretty much attached at the hip. When I left the ice cream social to look for the restroom, the two of them were..." he trailed off and blushed. Making out had been so much not what the two of them were doing. Not when hands were in the front of their pants stroking. He cleared his throat in the stretching silence, with the monkey grinning at him as if he'd realized what Thomas had seen them do and was pleased with it.

"Yeah, but you're also in my Studied for Success class." The last detail finally surfaced. "Adesida, right?"

"They have a fuck your way to the top class here?" the armadillo asked in dismay his Texan accent noticeable, "how did I miss that when looking the curriculum over?" He sat on the edge of the table, making it lean forward enough that the tablet on the other end of it slid forward, stopping only as it was about to tip over and fall off. "Why are you bothering with that, Lim? Didn't your family invent fucking their way to success?"

The monkey flipped the armadillo to the bird. "I'd tell you to sit on it and spin, Rowling, but you'd enjoy it too much." The monkey didn't stop looking at Thomas. "I remember you too. You had the giant sunday."

"That'd be him," Paul said, barely holding back the snickering.

"You should have seen it, Lo, it was huge. I mean Chima kind of huge." He frowned. "But you barely touched it by the thing was over. What was up with that?"

"Oh," Paul said between snickers and Thomas glared at him. "Just a father showing how proud he is of his son."

He was going to kill his best friend for that, Thomas thought as he felt his face burning.

"You're the Thomas the teacher kept calling out?" the monkey said, eyes wide. "Why didn't you step forward?"

Thomas tried to will himself smaller, or away, anywhere but here before his head burst into flame from embarrassment. Why they weren't stepping away from him in fear of getting burned he didn't know why. His black fur had to be glowing red at this point.

"Your dad's a teacher here?" the armadillo asked, "what does he teach?"

Thomas focused on that to get himself to breathe again. In that time, the monkey noticed the precariously balanced tablet and picked it up, glaring at the armadillo, as he placed it behind the pamphlet display, that seemed secured to the table.

"What?" the armadillo replied with a smirk. "You saying you didn't see that happening?"

The exchange made Thomas breathe easier as they no longer focused on him.

"So, what does your dad teach?"

"Mostly advanced physics," Thomas answered. "But he's sub for just about every science department." Which was why Thomas would never go into the hard sciences. He could just imagine his father pulling strings so he'd teach all his classes.

"That'd explain why there's no rat on my list of dilt teachers." The armadillo offered his hand. "Laurence Rowling, junior in industrial management, with a current assignment of keeping that nut job from screwing up too badly."

"Thomas Herts," he answered shaking the hand. "Undecided Freshman."

The monkey grabbed the hand as soon as Laurence let go of it. "Limbani Adesida, also undecided. And

for the record, I screw amazingly well.” He pulled Thomas, who blushed at the brazenness of the innuendo, into a hug and whispered. “And you are going to find out first hand... so to speak.”

The monkey let go and manage an innocent expression as stepped away from Thomas that had the armadillo roll his eyes.

Thomas couldn’t move as he processed what had just happened. That hug had been more forceful than the monkey’s lean body hinted at, and what he’d felt as Limbani ground his crotch against him did more than hint at a substantial package.

“And what about you?” the monkey asked Paul, who had been where he’d headed. “It’s rude to let your friend be the only one exposing himself like that.”

Thomas blushed more as he fought the urge to look down and check if his erection was visible.

“Paul Heeran, Freshman, destined for biochem.” The tiger replied with a smile. He lightly stepped away from the hand projected in his direction. “I’m going to pass. I don’t know you well enough to go for the kind of greetings that involved you rubbing your crotch against mine.”

Limbani shrugged, stepping back to the table and leaning against it, and spreading his head. His erection was clearly defined. “I’ll be happy to let you grind yours against mine if you prefer.”

Thomas looked at the armadillo, who gave a ‘what are do you want me to do’ shrug.

Didn’t just about molesting other students qualify as screwing up?

“We’re looking at waltzing levels of getting to know you before that happens,” Paul replied.

Limbani looked at the armadillo.

“What are you looking at me for? I know one dance, and that’s only because line dancing is mandatory in Texas.”

The monkey closed his mouth, then shrugged. “At least I know Thomas is interested.” He licked his lips.

Was he that much of an open book? “You’re awfully sure of yourself,” Thomas said, trying to sound like he was dismissing Limbani.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Laurence said with a groan.

“Anyway.” Limbani rubbed his hands together. “You two are here to sign up for the party.” He reached for where he’d put the tablet.

“Here,” Laurence said, offering it, no one, no... the one behind the display wasn’t there anymore.

How had Thomas missed the armadillo moving to grab it? Had having the monkey in his personal space been that distracting?

“What?” Thomas asked as the statement sank in.

“Do you have to sound like they don’t have a choice?” the armadillo asked.

“How do you spell your last name?” Limbani asked, tapping the stylus against the tablet’s casing.

“Wait a minute.” Thomas fought to get his mind into a gear that let him think clearly. “We didn’t agree to anything, right Paul?” He looked at the tiger, who smiled.

“Why not go? When is it?”

“Friday,” the armadillo answered. “It’s the frat’s big Welcome to all Freshman blow out.” He smiled. “Just means you guys have priority of the more experienced guy’s who’ll be there to show you a good time.”

Thomas nearly said yes as the implications of what Laurence said would take place, but stopped himself and looked at Paul. The tiger had been the one to say yes, but maybe he hadn’t realized what would take place?

“Are you sure you want to be at a party where the guys are... well, you know?” even if there was no one by them within earshot, Thomas couldn’t get himself to be as brazen as the monkey.

“It’s not like I’m going to be forced to participate in that part of the party, right?” Paul asked.

“Of course not,” Laurence said. “There’s going to be plenty of fully dressed stuff taking place. We, at Sigma Theta Gamma, pride ourselves on respecting other guys’ decisions.” He paused. “Present monkey excepted.”

Limbani snorted. “I have no problem respecting the guys who want to sleep with me.”

“Except he thinks they all do,” he told Paul.

“Then I’ll keep my distances from Limbani,” Paul said, smiling at the monkey. “Don’t worry Thomas, how am I going to find guys to dance with if I never do where the dancing’s happening? And I know that if I don’t go, you won’t either.” He looked at the armadillo. “Thomas is getting so stressed over his dad managing every aspect of his studies here and at home that he’s looking for a frat to join in the hopes that once he’s a sophomore, there’s a chance he’ll have a way to get out of there.”

Laurence's expression turned serious, while the monkey's was speculative.

"Just so there's no misunderstanding down the line," the armadillo said. "Sigma Theta Gamma is an exclusive brotherhood. We don't take outsiders."

"But that doesn't mean we won't do everything we can to relieve your tension." Limbani smiled so innocently that Thomas had trouble believing the entire park wasn't exploding with laughter.

"I want to." Thomas swallowed. "But you know my dad's never going to agree to this, Paul."

"Then sneak out of the house," Limbani said. "That is something that happens out here, right? It's not just in the movies?"

Thomas stared at the monkey, his blood was draining out of his face do face it had to be taking the black of his fur with it. It would end up more white than the rest of his body. "You don't know my father." Thomas swallowed harder. "The guy never sleeps." He shook his head. "And as much as I want to, one night of fun isn't worth the aggravation it's going to cause."

"He'll let you come," Limbani said with enough assurance, Thomas stared.

"Look," Paul said, placing a hand on Thomas's shoulder, also looking stunned by the monkey's proclamation. "You have nothing to lose by asking him. Give Limbani your name, and if you can't go, you can't go."

"And let's not forget you, mister hot gold," the monkey said. "We might end up dancing, you never know."

Paul smiled. "I don't mean dancing the way you mean it. But it's Heeran, two Es."

Thomas let out a breath. Paul was right. It was one party, maybe his father would say yes. It wasn't like one party would impact the rest of his life after all.

"It's Hertz. Spelled H E R T Z."

Chapter 03

Minneapolis, January 13th

Should that have qualified as a famous last words line? He was still alive, but the decision to go to that party had changed just about everything, it seemed.

He shouldered the door leading out of the covered walkway and almost backed right inside. As cold as it has been in there, the wind made the outside worse. But he had people chasing him so they'd be behind him, and ahead of him was the entrance to the metro with a crowd of people.

He hurried. People meant, among other things, body heat, and right now, he needed it. It also meant he could get lost among them. Get in, jump the gate and lose his pursuers among everyone heading home after a day of work.

"I'm telling you," a far too close voice said, "this is where I see him."

Thomas looked around for the monkey just as another voice he knew replied to him.

"I don't know how you can see him among that crowd," Kuno said. "I can't tell anyone apart."

He found Limbani as the monkey looked in his direction, the margay at his side. "Thomas! Wait up!"

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Minneapolis, September, 5th

"I told you he'd say yes!" The monkey hugged Thomas as the rat was still getting over the way the margay who'd checked his ID had looked him up and down like he was a prime cut of meat.

"How about you wait to molest the Freshman until after I've marked him?" the collie holding the bowl with dark ink and brush said. "I need to know if he leans to the left or the right."

Thomas eeped in surprise as Limbani groped him. "The right," the monkey said.

The collie rolled his eyes. "The wrists, Adesida, the wrists. Do you want him to rub it off and get kicked out?"

"That isn't what's getting rubbed."

Thomas retreated from the hand reaching for his crotch again and stepped into the margay.

"Sorry."

"You'll get your turn, Richard," Limbani said.

"Freshman, you don't belong here," the collie ordered. "This is for processing the arrivals, and you're in the way. Go wait for your pick-of-the-minute down the hall."

"What's that about me getting kicked out?"

"Give me the hand you jerk off with first so I can mark you."

"It's sounding like he isn't going to have to use either, the margay said without looking in their direction.

"I swear. Freshmen don't take this job seriously anymore. Richard, stop commenting and check IDs."

"I can multitask, Brukhammer."

Thomas processed the names as the collie drew a design on his left wrist. The grad student teaching his economics class was named Brukhammer, and Richard he knew from—

"We have a history of underage guys crashing our parties," the collie said. "Dares, sexual explorations. We don't need the aggravation. Anyone who looks too young and doesn't have that gets escorted out."

Thomas stepped aside so Paul could get the mark, and ignored the monkey motioning for him to join. He delayed by a few seconds by comparing the two marks. They were identical, something abstract that had to have taken the collie a lot of practice to be this accurate.

Paul pushed him toward the monkey, and this time, the hug came with a hand on Thomas's ass and the grinding of hard cocks. "I knew he'd let you come. Let me give you the tour."

"Actually, my mom was who made it happen," Thomas said as Limbani pulled him along and away from Paul, trying to forget the way she'd whispered something to his father, and the way he'd escorted her up to their bedroom, her hand on his ass.

He shouldn't know how sexual his parents were. That was just wrong.

He collided against the monkey's back in time to someone clearing his throat before them. A bat stood

in their way, arms crossed over his chest.

“Lim bani, what have I told you about taking for granted what someone else wants?”

“That’s not what I’m doing.” He pulled Thomas next to him and put an arm over his shoulders. “I’m just going to show my undecided freshman the house so he can decide where we’re going to have our fun”

“That is exactly—” the bat shook his head. “You know what. You get a pass for tonight.” He offered Thomas his hand. “Henry Hendrick. If this one pushes too far, come and tell me. I’ll make sure he’s punished properly.”

He shook the hand. “Thomas Hertz. And you don’t have to worry, I am okay with what we’re going to do... it’s just all a bit new. Came out of the closet at prom, so not exactly an expert at... you know.” Thomas’s ears burned so how he could probably keep food warm with them.

“Nevertheless,” Henry said, smiling affectionately, “you don’t have to say yes to the first offer just because this is your first time. At Sigma Theta Gamma, we believe sex is an important part of life, and I would hate for you to be scared into being a lifetime virgin by one of my charges.”

Charges made Henry sound like he was an old man looking after children when he couldn’t be more than a few years older than Thomas. Even if he was a grad student, that would make him in his mid-twenties, maybe early thirties, if he’d taken his time getting there.

The bat stepped aside, and Lim bani was pulling Thomas along again. He looked over his shoulder once, feeling Henry’s eyes on him, but the bat was talking with Paul. Then he was looking ahead again as he nearly tripped from the speed he was being pulled at.

The monkey stopped in the living room, filled with guys talking and laughing. He only saw one couple on their way to first base among them and wondered where all the sex was happening. Then he remembered that most guests were freshmen like him, so he might not be the only one with lower sexual confidence.

Then there was a glimpse of the kitchen, and they were through another living room.

What?

How large was the frat? And hadn’t they made it past the townhouse’s wall to reach this room? The frat stood on a row of townhouses he and Paul had walked by since the only parking at been at the end of the block.

Thomas tried to find the breath to ask, but he needed it to keep up with the monkey and they reach stairs. The second floor had bedrooms, a lot of them. How many guys were in the frat? Opposite one bedroom door was an open one, and he was the one to nearly yanking the monkey off his feet as he looked into the bathroom.

It was one large room with overhead showerheads in the center. On one side were sinks on the other, the only stalls there, but much too small to be other showers.

Lim bani poked his head in, then smirked. “What? Did you think we’d have individual showers? Where’s the fun in that? And it isn’t like we’ve never seen what the other guys are sporting.” He paused. “Well, except for one.” He smiled. “I’ll introduce you later.” Then he was pulling Thomas again as something that had to approach warp two.

They were through a lounge where guys were watching sports on a large screen. Then Thomas had a plastic cup in his hand and the afterimage of dark brown, lustrous fur.

“Keep him hydrated,” the otter yelled after them.

“I was planning on it, Felix!” the monkey replied.

“Your cum doesn’t count!”

“There’s water in that!” Lim bani gave Thomas a shrug. “You have to excuse him. Chouteaus think they run everything.”

Thomas didn’t bother trying to figure that one out, sniffing the cup. As the otter implied, this had no alcohol, only a fruit cocktail, which he sipped as best as he could at the breakneck pace the monkey was imposing.

Up another set of stairs, past doors that Lim bani said were bedrooms. Then he was in one of them, taking in the bed, desk, and dresser. An unusual sound made him turn around; the monkey was leaning against the door, letting go of the knob.

The sound had been that of a lock. And Thomas fought the irrational giggle at the idea he’d confirmed there was such a thing as a bedroom door lock. He could bring the information home and his siblings could rejoice and then demand they get some too so they could have privacy.

“And this one is my room,” Lim bani said with a tone of ‘there are many like it, but mine is the best’.

Thomas’s nod stop midway. “Wait, how did you rate a room in a frat? I thought you had to be a

sophomore to get one.”

“You’re in my room and that’s what you want to know about?” the monkey asked suspiciously.

“Well, yeah.”

“You saw how our booth didn’t have signs and all we did was talk about the party, right? We don’t take outsiders, so that means there’s always room available, unlike the other frats that have the kind of waiting lists the Al-khatib accumulate outside their bedroom doors.”

Thomas finished the nod and looked around again. On the desk was the picture of three monkeys hugging. He changed to one of two of them in the process of throwing the third in a lake.

The bed creaking made Thomas look over his shoulder and freeze in the process of looking at the frame again. How had the monkey gotten naked in the few seconds he’d looked at the pictures?

The innocent expression was in stark contrast to the erection fully on display. The large erection. Was it a foot long? Should he be dancing at the chance of a lifetime, or... his ass bumped the desk as he took a step back. He felt his tail wrapped around his leg. Okay, it was the ‘I might not survive the experience’ feeling that won.

“I.. you...” he swallowed. “Please tell me you have smaller dildos in a drawer. Like a dozen of them, so I can work myself up to...” he motioned to the monkey’s cock. “You”

Limbani’s small ear canted back in confusion, looking down at his cock.

Did he not realize how big he was? Thomas wondered.

The expression cleared as the monkey looked back up and grinned. “Oh, I’m not fucking you.” He got a faraway expression, then nodded. “No, I’m not.” He put his hands behind his head. “I’m just going to sit here and let you do whatever you want to me.”

Thomas looked into his cup and wondered if he should go see if there was alcohol in the house. He drained it and put the cup on the desk. He was doing this. “So...” maybe not? “Am I really that obvious, or is gaydar an actual thing? Because even at the park, you were after me.”

Limbani raised an eyebrow. “Maybe you’re just that gorgeous.”

Thomas stared at the monkey, not finding the joke funny.

Surprised, Limbani hesitated, then said. “Okay, I shouldn’t tell you this. It is kind of a no-no, but I know stuff. It’s mostly who I’m going to have sex with, and when, and where.” He motioned around them. “I saw this coming that morning.”

Thomas considered that one of the worse come-on-line he’d ever heard. And he was already here, in the bedroom of a naked guy offering him his cock to...

Oh fuck, what was he still doing on that side of the room?

He dropped to his knees between the monkey’s legs and stared at that cock up close. What was he expected to do with something that long, that thick? He wrapped a hand around the firm and hot shaft. His index barely touched his thumb. With this other he hefted the monkey’s balls and they fit in his hand perfectly. This was the kind of specimen he’d only seen on the net before, and those pictures always left him wondering if photo manipulation had been used.

Limbani chuckled, and Thomas looked up at an amused monkey. “It’s not made to be admired. It’s made to be used. Just be careful of your gag reflex.”

He licked the tip, not pausing at the salty taste of the precum. He moved down, wrapping his lips around the head. Pushed and pulled, his tongue roaming the surface while his lips teased the crown. The monkey sighed, and Thomas prepared himself for a hand on his head to guide him.

It didn’t come, and a glance up showed him Limbani with his hands still behind his head, eyes closed, and with a contented smile. He was true to his word not to interfere with what Thomas wanted.

And what he wanted, was more of this cock.

He pushed down, taking in more of it, feeling the texture with his tongue. He liked the feel of it in his muzzle, and he kept pushing down. Then he pulled up in a fit of coughing.

“You okay down there?” Limbani asked, and Thomas nodded while still fighting the mix of gagging and catching his breath. The monkey chuckled. “I did warn you to be careful.”

Instead of commenting, the rat went lower and licked the heavy balls. It was... interesting. The taste of sweat and the musky smell was appealing in a way Thomas hadn’t expected. He suckled on one, then the other, before licking his way up the shaft. At the top, he found more beading precum, the bait at the end of a hook.

He took the bait, then swallowed the cock, but stopped before the head reached the back of his throat. He moved his head up and down, his tongue pressing it against the textured roof of his palate.

Limbani moaned, and Thomas echoed it around the thick cock. Why hadn’t he sucked off Paul before?

Fuck, why hadn't he offered to suck off Nathan at any point? It wasn't like it would have mattered that the rat wasn't a girl for a blow job, right?

The monkey said something in a language Thomas didn't recognize as he swallowed around the cock, then. "Slow... down. Oh, fuck... I want this to last." He groaned. "A little."

Thomas nearly stopped to point out the deal was that he got to have his way, but that would give the monkey what he wanted, so he gave him a raised eyebrow, a tilted ear, and picked up speed. He closed his eyes and focused on the texture of the cock, the moans. He realized it let him anticipate the thrust and hold Limbani down, controlling how he deep throated him. The monkey was speaking in that other language again as Thomas went back to bobbing up and down, catching his breath.

The hand on the back of his head and the start of a groan were the only warning Thomas got. Then the cock pulsed, and on the second one, hot, salty, bitter cum filled his mouth.

He swallowed, then swallowed again. Just how much cum did the monkey have? Had he abstained for the weeks leading up to this party? Had he and the margay making out only been about teasing each other to have more cum?

Finally, the jet of cum slowed, then stopped. Thomas kept sucking for a second, then licked every inch of that cock clean so none of that bitter and salty nectar was wasted. Only then did he fall back on his ass, making him painfully aware of his rock-hard cock in his pants.

"Wow," Limbani said, looking down at Thomas in what seemed like amazement. "I didn't... that was not.... Why didn't I?" he seemed to give up. "Wow."

"So," Thomas said, suddenly slightly self-conscious, "Not too bad for my first time?"

"Well." The monkey had to pause, still catching his breath. "You broke my top ten." He flopped on the bed. "So, very good for your first time."

Feeling better, Thomas stood and noticed the plastic cup on the desk. He realized he was thirsty, but not for juice, or alcohol or anything he'd get out of a cup.

"I want more," he told the monkey, and in a feat of gymnastics that could have landed Limbani the Olympic team, if they started a naked version, he was on his feet.

"You are so in the right place for that." He unlocked the door and started pulling it open, but Thomas slammed a hand on it, closing it back.

"Pants, he instructed. Even in his needy state, he wasn't about to let the monkey parade in his fur in front of other guys.

Limbani smiled and moved the hand. When he opened the door. Moaning and groaning entered. "I don't think I need them, do you?"

Thomas stared at the empty section of hall he could see, trying to understand how none of those guys had been heard with the door closed.

"The soundproofing in this place is top-notch," Limbani said. "You might want to leave your clothes in here before we exit. That way, you'll know where they are by the end of the night."

Thomas looked down. The front of his pants was wet and tented. Opposite it was Limbani's cock, back to being hard. He reached back for the tail strap but stopped. "I think I'm going to keep them on for a while longer."

A raised eyebrow and amused shrug was the response. Then the monkey was in the hall. Thomas followed the monkey past closed doors and by a lounge where guys were fooling around in various states of undress. He licked his lips at the sight of the cocks being fondled, then noticed the three only fully dressed guys in a corner of the lounge looking nervously at what was going on. Two were rubbing the front of their jeans, while the third looked stunned.

Thomas figured this was where he'd start. Those two, maybe three, if him sucking cock snapped the other out of his stupor. They looked like he'd felt with a naked monkey offering himself to him, so he was in a perfect position to help them through it. And Limbani said his cock sucking skill was decent, so...

He turned to the monkey to let him know what he was about to do and froze.

"Is he real?"

Down the hall, a tall hyena stood, no posed. Perfect abs and deltoids, square shoulders to which were attached massive arms. Before him were three guys on their knees worshiping a cock so long and thick it couldn't belong on a real guy. That was the kind of cock painters of old put on paintings of gods.

Limbani chuckled. "That's Chima. When they tell a guy, another guy won't have something he hasn't seen before. He's the exception. And yes, it is all very wonderfully real."

Thomas turned the monkey around and looked him in the eyes. His hand shook as he realized this might be the most important question of the night, maybe of his life. "How do I get myself some of that?"

The smirk appeared and vanished as Limbani studied Thomas's face. "You just have to ask him nicely." He grabbed the rat as he started heading in that direction. "But trust me with this, Chima is someone you want to work your way up to, not choke on from the start." He grinned. "And I know just the chain of guys to get you to him."

Thomas forgot about the boys in the lounge as that thirst returned with an unexpected vengeance. "Take me to them." Ordered the rat. "Now."

Chapter 04

Minneapolis, January 13th

“Hey, watch it.” The man shoved Thomas away, looking around as he cursed.

Thomas did the same. How had he made it inside the station? He’d heard Limbani, had looked toward the glass doors, and...

He’d blacked out again?

He leaned against the wall, soaking in the warmth. What he needed was a nap. All that running in the cold and now the heat, he needed a rest.

He glanced at the door. But the monkey and margay, and who knew who else from the frat, had to be right on his heel.

He ran up the stairs to the sound of a train departing. He was going to have to wait for the next one. They were going to catch up to him any second now, then they were going to take him back to the frat and Henry would...

Thomas had no idea what the bat would do.

He kept moving among the crowd. He was afraid that if he sat he’d nod off and wake up tied up in the back of a car.

Henry had said Thomas had teleported, and he’d acted, not like it was normal, but definitely not like it was the impossibility it was. He’d been surprised, overjoyed. The bat was insane, because it was only Thomas blacking out in fear, then, exhaustion now.

The train arrived and Thomas pushed his way through the crowd. It had been the longest ten minutes and he wasn’t interested in risking another one. Inside he dropped into a seat and fought to keep his eyes open.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, September, 6th

Thomas looked at his bedroom door to make sure the large box of books he’d put before it, his poor attempt at a lock, hadn’t moved by itself, then tapped the link that came up when he did the search Paul had told him to. ‘Wild frat Chima.’

The top result was named ‘giant hyena is taken by freshman’ from a site called ‘wild frat dot com’

The video started with a pan over a crowd of guys looking at something. That something, the panning revealed, was an adonis of a hyena Thomas remembered seeing at the party. The one who had been the driving force behind a lot of the cock he’d sucked, even if he couldn’t quite recall sucking all of them.

Chima was sitting there, massive arms over the back of the couch, looking down with a bemused expression. Kneeling between his legs was a rat with black fur from his head down his torso, abruptly changing to white in an uneven line along his waist. It was him, kneeling there.

He straightened in his chair, his breath catching as the angle changed. He ignored Paul’s chuckle in his earpiece as his face came into view. A face with its muzzle in the hyena’s crotch. For a moment, Thomas thought the cock, which had looked big from the other end of the hall, with guys worshipping it, was resting against his throat. That it wasn’t his throat stretched like that. Only, then he was pulling his head up, and up, and up, and the whole cock came into view.

With his head for comparison, there was no way he had managed to swallow that. Despite the evidence he’s just looked at, it couldn’t be done.

“How don’t I remember doing that?” he whispered. The angle changed again, revealing that he was kneeling over Limbani, who was enthusiastically sucking him, and a needy whine escaped Thomas’s lips.

“Do you need a moment along with your hand?” Paul said, chuckling louder.

Thomas was reminded that he was on a video call with the realization he was stroking himself. He stopped and, blushing, he looked for an option to download the video. He was not risking this getting flagged and removed. He was going to come back to that often. He paused as he caught sight of the counter. One point three million views in half a day.

“I’m going to be famous for something I don’t even remember doing, how is that fair?”

Paul snorted in his coffee. At least his best friend looked awake now. Being woken up at two in the

afternoon didn't agree with the tiger. "After you sucked off what has to be the entire frat and half the guest? You're going to be famous for a lot more than this achievement."

"Someone has to have put something in the punch because I barely remember sucking off a few guys." He rubbed his face. "What about you? Please tell me that you didn't end up sitting alone in a corner because you agreed to drive me to the party. Tell me you at least found a guy you were comfortable enough with to get some."

Paul gave him an odd smile. "Not at the party."

* * * * *

Minneapolis, January 13th

Thomas cursed as he nearly walked into the back of a massive hyena.

"I know this is the most likely place he'll get off the train," Chima said, his deep voice making Thomas's bones rattle and cock twitch. "I did run all the way here, didn't I? But I'm telling you—" He spun and Thomas yelped in fear of being caught. "—he isn't here."

Thomas turned away from the wall that was suddenly inches from his muzzle, and the final words of the conversation came behind him.

"Sorry," Chima said, his back to him and searching the crowd. "I thought I'd seen him, but no."

How? He'd been where the hyena was looking and now...

This was impossible.

As much as he wanted to believe he'd blacked out again, there had been no break in what Chima said.

He had actually teleported?

Thomas didn't know if he should be scared or elated, but what he did know, as the hyena turned back this way, was that he couldn't be here anymore. With one longing look at Chima's body, he ran outside.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, September, 20th

The body told him the man standing between his legs as Thomas lay back on the stone altar was Chima. Defined muscles under short brown fur spotted with plat spots in places. A cock coming to rest on top of his that dwarfed it and any other. No cock could be that big, that thick.

No real person should have such a cock.

And maybe the man before him wasn't real, Thomas thought as a mask was slipped over the hyena's head. The same one the twelve men to fuck him this evening had worn as they did it.

Made to look like bone. An ungulate's head, a deer with a twelve-point rack, but the teeth of a predator, with the long incisor of the famed saber tooth tiger. On the others, it had looked like what it was, a mask. But here, now, in what might be the delirium of the previous twelve orgasms, Chima was some...thing else.

The mask melded into the massive body and made the person slowly grinding his cock over Thomas's surreal. In those empty eye sockets, he should see Chima's brown eyes, but instead, there was only a vast emptiness.

The hy—this being shifted position and the pole of a cock that couldn't belong on anyone mortal was no longer resting on Thomas's cock, but pressing between his ass cheeks. Not demanding access. No, as powerful and needy as this being was, this was an asking. He might have asked the question out loud, but words meant nothing to Thomas anymore. All that mattered was feeling.

And he wanted to feel that cock inside him. He didn't care about the consequences, about the damage it might do to him. He needed it inside him. He needed to feel that power exerted on him, in him.

The entry was slow and gentle, it could almost be described as tender. Pleasure stretched Thomas, the pleasure of being owned and cared for. Of belonging. Yes, this was where he belonged. Where he should have been from the start. This was who had been waiting for him for longer than Thomas could understand.

The bottomed out and Thomas let out a cry. Ecstasy and want. He wanted so much. They both did. Then the being fucking Thomas took. He took the cock away, but before he could cry out again at the absence, it was back, stretching him. It went in deeper this time, so deep it hit Thomas at the core of who he was, and the orgasm was electrifying.

But it didn't end with it. The being continued fucking him, and Thomas continued wanting it.

Each time he managed to force his eyes open among the pleasure, those empty sockets bore into him with approval.

The thrusting intensified and this silent being made a first sound, a grunt, then came a groan, a snort, and grinding of teeth as he grabbed Thomas's hips to keep him from being pounded off the alter, this place where Thomas belongs. Each time the cock bottomed out, Thomas cried out in pleasure, in anticipation, in want.

Another grunt, accompanied by a pulsing of the cock in his ass that Thomas rejoiced at while having no idea how he could feel something that minute among the sea of sensation he was drowning in. But it was coming. No, he was cumming and Thomas was where he needed to be of it.

The being raised his head and the scream was silent as cum exploded in Thomas's ass, and the world exploded around Thomas.

Chapter 05

Minneapolis, January 13th

Thomas cursed as he saw the van in the driveway of his parent's house and hid behind the car in the driveway to avoid being seen. He was in Mister Armon's driveway, two houses away, and across the street from his parents. He wanted to hit his head against the car. How hadn't he considered that? Chima had been at the closest stop, of course, they'd send someone here.

Gilbert, by the van.

He could just see it, his mother and father tied to chairs, looking at each other in fear and want as the armadillo brandished burning fireworks to get them to say where Thomas was.

He shook himself. His imagination was running wild. Gilbert wouldn't do something like that. He kept shaking, and he realized he was shivering uncontrollably.

He couldn't stay out here. It was already a miracle he wasn't frozen stiff.

He considered knocking on Mister Armon's door, as it was the closest, but the old man would call his parents no matter what Thomas said, and with Gilbert there... he looked further down the street, but that same reasoning applied to Paul's house. His mother would be there, and worried about Thomas's state, she would call his parents.

It wasn't like he could explain why she needed to wait until his Gilbert was gone before calling. "Hi, Ms. Heeran, yeah, I suddenly discovered I can teleport and now my frat brothers have gone crazy and are hunting me across..."

He looked at the house again.

Could he do it?

He couldn't see his bedroom window from here, so he moved along the street, doing all he could to be inconspicuous in his t-shirt and jeans. He was behind a car park on the side of the road when he sat the form step to the living room window and was elated to notice it was a rat, then he dropped as the bulk on the frame registered.

Fuck. Gilbert wasn't alone, he'd brought Madoc.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, October, 9th

Thomas swallowed as the other rat lathered his body. More like tactilely analyzed it, using working in the furwash as an excuse. His flat chest, non-existent abs.

"You need more muscle mass," Madoc said.

"This was just the first sess—" he went utterly still as the rat's hands reach Thomas's cock which was definitely not the largest one either of them had seen. He lingered there, stroking it to full mast and rubbing the balls, and Thomas bit his lower lip to keep from making any sounds. The gym's shower stall definitely wasn't the place to get caught being jerked off.

Just as he thought he wouldn't be able to keep the moaning in, the stroking stopped. "Madoc?" he asked the rat's back.

"Hurry and rinse off," the rat replied, sounding way too satisfied with himself. "The others are waiting."

As the door to the stall closed, cutting Madoc from view and impressing on Thomas how, no, he wasn't going to get an orgasm unless he did it himself, he hurried to rinse and sluice most of the water out of his fur, then hurried to join the other rat on his way to the locker room.

"You could have finished me off, you know," he told Madoc.

"Sorry," the rat replied with a smirk. "I'm not Limbani, and as impressive as your stamina's been recently, you have limits."

"Is that like the money-tree parable or something?" Thomas asked as he followed Madoc. "I'm the tree and if everyone takes more than I can dish out, I'll die? Because of that's the case, let me tell you that I don't mind going—this isn't the locker room." He looked around at the tiled wall and towels stacked on shelves. "I think I've been here before."

Madoc sighed. "Figures the monkey beat me to my favorite spot." He pushed a door open and heat escaped it. Not as much as sauna should generate, but Thomas decided that was for the best as he followed him in and saw the six hunks fucking on the bench.

The only one he recognized was the giraffe who'd stop by as Thomas was doing Lat pulls under Madoc's supervision. Now he knew what he'd been inviting the rat to.

"You made it," the giraffe said, but looking at Thomas.

He swallowed as his tail twirled around his leg.

"Madoc," he said as the other kept him from backing out. There had been nothing with quite this many guys since the event that had been his hazing, well, a trip to heaven. He'd been with two and three guys at the frat, and there was the fivesome that had involved Gilbert, Laurent, Kuno, and of course, Limbani. But this was upping that number and—

Madoc pushed him to an open spot on the bench. "You worked hard during that first session, so now, it's time for your reward." He sat Thomas, lifted his legs over his shoulders, and pushed his cock in. Thomas's moans joined the others, only cut when a muzzle pressed against his. Not Madoc, the giraffe. Hands roamed his body, more than just the rat fucking him, and when a mouth closed over his cock and Thomas screamed in the ongoing kiss as he came.

With a tweak of Thomas's nipple, the giraffe broke the kiss, and before the rat caught his breath, there was a cock at his lips. He eagerly sucked it in and then the guy—all Thomas saw was white fur—took care of the thrusting.

With a grunt, Madoc came, and no sooner had he pulled out that another, thicker, cock was inside him. Thomas moaned as his cock was sucked again. The white-furred guy thrust harder, then was still as he filled Thomas's mouth with cum.

"You have got to be kidding me!" the yell nearly had Thomas biting the cock and choking on the cum. Then he was trying to flee, but white fur was still pressed against his face and no amount of pushing moved him. And the guy fucking him wasn't stopping.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Madoc, to message me when you're starting one of these?" Thomas managed to angle his head and see the stocky, older, naked rhino in the doorway. "I had to hear about it from Jerry."

"Sorry," Madoc replied, and Thomas found him on a higher bench, with his legs over his shoulder and the giraffe fucking him. "It wasn't going to be a group thing, but there were already here. Thomas is a brother I'm starting to train. Thomas, meet Hector. He'd the football coach."

Thomas's breathing slowed with the realization everyone knew everyone else, so he didn't bolt up and away when white fur, a polar bear, moved off his face.

"I'm calling this capacity," the rhino said, latching the door. "It's a good thing none of you remembered to do that because if I had been locked out, I'd have made the team pay for it." He leveled his gaze on them. "And made sure they knew who's fault it was."

The one fucking him, a buffalo, grunted as he came, and sat on a bench.

"Thomas is it?" the rhino said, taking the buffalo's place. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He pushed his cock in and Thomas's reply was taken away by the rough fucking.

Okay, if this was how every training session was going to end, maybe he could find a way to clear a spot on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday like Madoc wanted him to do.

Chapter 06

Minneapolis, January 13th

Madoc stepped away from the window, and Thomas moved three cars down, remaining low to use them to block the worse of the frigid wind, and in case the other rat reappeared.

From here, he could see the window to his room on the second floor, and even make out his poster of Gerry Erwell.

So, how did he get there?

How had he done it with Chima? What about the other times? Did they have anything in common? He'd been surprised and... no, that wasn't right. Nothing had happened when Chima's presence had surprised him. It hadn't been until the hyena had started turning and Thomas become terrified he'd be caught that—

Fear? Yes, he's been scared the other times too. Not the low-grade feat he'd felt as he ran, but the spike when he'd thought he was about to be caught. When he'd seen those fangs about to plant in his neck. Probably to rip it open.

Great. Now all he had to do was recreate that sensation.

He looked around. Maybe Limbani could simply jump out from behind the next car over? The monkey had appeared out of nowhere often enough to drag him to some really not appropriated place for sex. His constant talk of knowing things were taking on a new aspect.

The monkey didn't indulge Thomas this time.

Fear meant a spike in adrenaline. His heart rate had jumped up. His chest felt tight.

Come on!

He tightened his chest until a shiver ran down his body. Nothing was—

A door slammed open and Thomas barely kept from yelling as he fell into a chair that then rolled and bumped the desk. He held his breath and kept still, trying to control his shivering as he waited for the silence to be broken by voices and steps running to capture him.

Then he realized he was in his room and had to fight against letting out a whoop of elation. He'd done it. He'd consciously teleported. He remembered the door, the spike of fear.

Okay, nearly done it.

But he'd learned a few things. His body didn't change position, so he had to make sure he wasn't going to have part of it where there would be an object in the way. He didn't want to learn the hard way if he could, or couldn't appear inside a solid item. He also wasn't guaranteed a ground landing. He looked at his poster, the angle to the window, and envisioned the line of sight. Yeah. The chair had been by the wall and he'd appeared over it.

The distant conversation didn't change, and as he relaxed, the shivers intensified, and exhaustion caught up to him.

He couldn't stay. The plan had been to appear in, grab warm clothing, and teleport away to vanish in the night, but after all this running he was entitled to rest in his own room wasn't he?

The shivering intensified and he startled as he fell out of the chair. He was on his feet, heart in his throat listening for a change in the conversation. This spike of fear hadn't caused him to teleport, but with the adrenaline keeping the exhaustion at bay, he knew he couldn't give into it.

In the closet, he pulled out the old winter jacket. It barely fit him anymore after four months of Madoc's supervised weight training, but it wasn't like he had anything here he'd bought after starting training. He got out of his wet clothes and pulled out a pair of jeans, pausing to look at them. Was he even going to fit in them the way his waist had thickened as he'd gained muscles? Why hadn't he left at least one set of clothing here when he'd come over for thanksgiving?

The door knob turned and Thomas let go of the pants as he grabbed hold of his fear. He couldn't risk teleporting without control again.

He was next to the door, a hand clamped over the rat's black muzzle before they could react, and Thomas was relieved to see it was his brother he was pulling into the room.

"Look, Madoc," his father said, down in the living room. The open door let in just enough sound Thomas could listen in. "I know my son. There is no way Thomas does drugs."

"I didn't say he did drugs, Mister Hertz," Madoc replied.

"It's Eric."

Thomas couldn't keep from smiling. Even under these circumstances, his father couldn't stand being called Mister Hertz off campus grounds.

"It was an accident, Eric."

"So, one of you has drugs and they left them lying around?" his father replied in a threatening tone.

"Of course not," Gilbert said, offended. "Henry would go ballistic if one of us had something like that. Not that any of us has an interest in drugs."

"Then how?"

Madoc sighed in annoyance. "At the last party, someone, we're thinking a rival frat, left a case of soda in the kitchen. We discovered they were laced with something when one of the guests started tripping and acting paranoid. We had a bitch restraining him until the paramedics got there."

"I never heard about it," Eric said, sounding concerned.

"With all due respect, sir," Gilbert said. "Well, Duh."

"We handed the cans to the paramedics, but we must have missed one," Madoc said.

"Thomas must have come across it," Gilbert continued, "because we found an empty one in his room. That was after we heard him screaming in fear about Henry. By the time some of us made it to his room, he'd run outside without even grabbing his jacket. Henry had joined him to..."

"You're telling me my son drank a soda he knew to be drugged?"

"I don't think he knew," Madoc said.

"You're saying Thomas wasn't at the party?" his mother asked.

"Oh he was there," Gilbert said with a chuckle. "Thomas is quite popular at them. I don't think he made it off of the second floor until well after the incident. We told him about it, but I don't think anyone mentioned the soda's brand. I didn't even pay attention to it."

"We ran after him," Madoc said, "but with the storm, he had a lead on us by then." He trailed off. "Limbani caught sight of him running into the metro, so we figured this was the most likely place he was heading to. Me and Gil drive here while the others kept looking around the campus and any other place we could think of."

Roland's surprise had passed enough he tilted an ear quizzically.

Thomas shook his head. He was impressed and unsettled at how gifted his two frat brothers were at lying. He had never picked up on that. There was enough truth to the story they'd told that if Thomas hadn't been the one living it, he could have believed it.

His brother mumbled something and pointed to the hand around his muzzle. Thomas thought about it, then shook his head. He wasn't risking Roland calling Madoc up here because he still believed them. He knew the two of them had struck up a friendship since Thomas had caught them nearly pantless in the bathroom on thanksgiving.

Thomas had believed Madoc when he'd said they were just comparing musculature and discussing training, but now, after hearing how easily and well the other rat lied? He had told Madoc not to his on his straight brother, but...

"Thomas would have called Paul," Judith said. At least she didn't sound entirely convinced. "I don't care how out of it you claim he was. Paul's always been the first person Thomas calls when he even thinks he's in trouble."

Something was deposited on the coffee table. Something hard by the sound. "That is how badly he was freaking out," Madoc said. "It's probably the only time I've seen Thomas go anywhere without his phone."

"Oh my God," his mother said, as Thomas reflexively checked for his phone with his free hand and touched fur. "My baby's out there, freezing. We have to do something, Eric."

No, he was in here, soaking in the heat from being far too close to his brother while being naked. Could this day get any worse? He felt himself react to the proximity to Roland and clamped down on his libido.

Oh, it could, but he wasn't going there.

"It's okay," Madoc said. "We have it covered. Kuno's family's tight with the chief of police so even they're looking for him. We are going to find him," he insisted, "we just didn't want you out of the loop, and so you'd know the state he's in if he makes it here. He might act normal, but it's not going to be out of his system yet. Just call me if he shows up. I'll make sure the best doctors see him."

"When my son makes it home," Eric said, tone firm. "I'll make sure he gets the care he needs. And you can expect to hear from the dean once this is resolved. Rampant sex in public is one thing to turn a blind eye

to, but leaving contaminants lying around for anyone unaware to pick up will necessitate reconsidering your charter.”

“We told you,” Gilbert said, “It was planted—”

“Don’t, Gil,” Madoc said. “They’re scared and angry. I understand, Eric. You have mine and Henry’s number. All I’d asked for, as Thomas’s friend, is that you let me know if he’s here so I know he’s safe.”

“Oh, Mister Hendrick will definitely hear from me.” When he continued, Eric’s tone was softer. “But I’ll let you know when Thomas gets home.”

In the following silence, the front door opened, then closed. A few seconds later, Gilbert’s van started and drove away.

Roland grunted and pointed to the hand again, eyebrow raised. Thomas realized that throughout all of this, his brother hadn’t caused any trouble. It wasn’t like Thomas would have been able to stop him if Roland had wanted to be out of his grip. Four-month of even Madoc’s training regiment wasn’t enough to equate to his younger brother’s years of training.

Thomas quietly closed the door and let go of his brother.

“What the fuck?” Roland hissed, stepping away.

“Yeah, that’s about how I feel,” Thomas whispered back.

“Are you on drugs?” there was way too much seriousness in the tone.

Thomas looked his eyes “do I look on drugs?”

Roland looked at him and immediately away. “You’re naked,” He mumbled, ears folding back. “I know that’s the dress code at the frat, but do you have to bring it home?”

“Madoc wasn’t lying when he said I ran out of there without my jacket.” He pulled the pants on. “It’s a fucking miracle I didn’t get hypothermia on the way here with how wet my close got.”

“If you two start making out,” Judith said, opening the door, “you have better take pictures.”

“Judith!” Thomas and Roland yelled at the same time in the same indignant tone.

Thomas pulled his pants up so fast to cover himself that he found out they were indeed a little tight around the crotch. And that was why his voice had risen an octave as he yelled his sister’s name, he decided.

“In case you haven’t heard,” he said from the doorway, not bothering to contain her laughter. “Thomas’s up here.” His parents were running up the stairs before she was done calling.

Thomas barely had the tail strap closed that his mom had her arm around him. “Are you alright?” she looked at him. “Did they do anything?” Her tone darkened. “You give the word, Thomas, and I will unleash the Royer’s anger on each and every one of them.”

“I’m fine, Mom.” He tried, and failed, to extricate himself out of her grip. What was the point of all that strength training if he couldn’t use it to get out of a forty-year-old housewife and cooking podcaster?

“You don’t look to be under the effect of any drugs,” Eric said, studying him.

“I don’t know what that was about.” Thomas gave up and let his mother look him over. “There hasn’t been any drugs in the house, not even by accident. Like Madoc said, Henry wouldn’t stand for it and nothing we do gets by him. He’s psychic or something.” The words were just that, or so he’d thought, but he was having to rethink a lot of what he’d been thinking as small incidents. “The one time one of the rival frats did try to sneak spiked soda at a party, Limbani was on them before anyone realized it and it wasn’t one of his usual, I’ve seen us having sex thing.”

He fell silent as he realized what he’d just told his parents and sibling, not that Judith didn’t already know, and because like other small things, now that he could teleport, Limbani’s claims were taking on a different meaning.

“Then why the story?” Judith asked. “Do you think Yat would tell me the truth?” there was just enough worry in her voice Thomas thought she might actually care for the red panda.

“I’m not sure you’d believe the truth, it’s sort of impossible.”

“So they did do something,” Eric said, tone sharp.

“No, it’s not them, it’s...” How the fuck was he supposed to explain any of it? “I was making funnel cakes for the guys when Yat started to...” He blushed. “There was the flash of a grease fire, then we were in my room and all the guys were fu—”

The looks he received were expectant but mainly confused.

Telling them would only make him sound like he was on drug.

He looked at his mother, still holding him “Mom, Dad,” he added. “don’t freak out.”

“What about me?” Judith asked as Thomas over his shoulder at the room and pick the other corner as his destination.

"Feel free to freak out, sis." He stared at it, tightening his chest in an attempt to recreate how he'd felt looking at his bedroom window.

"Thomas, honey?" his mother asked worriedly.

"Sorry, this is harder if I'm not scared out of my mind." Come on, he'd basically willed it to happen. He'd been looking up, tightening his chest. A door had slammed and the tightening had been more and—

"Thomas!" his mother yelled behind him, and the fear in her voice made his mental 'yes' of victory falter. She was still looking at the empty space between her arms. Another thing he learned, he realized, as he took in the stunned looks from his father, sister, and brother, was that he didn't automatically bring someone touching him with him. Good thing, considering the lamp he was standing next to.

"How?" Roland asked; the first to find his voice.

"I don't know." Thomas was grabbed and hugged tightly by his mother.

"Do not ever scare me like that again," she threatened.

Thomas nodded and hugged her back.

"Wait a minute," Judith said. "Is that what happened at Grandpa? I swore that you were in the bed." She made a jacking-off motion, "then you weren't. I mean you looked at me, terrified."

"You never said anything," Eric said.

"I don't know," Thomas said, clearly remembering her walking into their grandfather's office which had been reassigned as his room for the duration of the Christmas stay since there were so many Hertz there. But after that was kind of fuzzy. Much like...

"If that's what happened, then it's like what happened when I woke up in my bedroom, instead of what I just did. I blacked out and the guys had to... err... resuscitate me?"

"Resuscitate how?" Eric demanded.

Thomas's ears burned as Judith hid her snickering behind her hand. Roland's confusion gave way to understanding and his ears turned red before they folded back.

"I think we have more pressing matters, Eric," his mother said, "than our son's reluctance to speak about his exploits." Her eyes glinted with pride.

Some days, he didn't get his mother. He'd basically he'd nearly died because of what happened. After all, he had almost died at Grandpa's. But she was proud he'd been fucked by the entire frat.

"Very well," his father said. "Do you have any idea why Madoc and Gilbert were here with a story of you being drugged, or why they'd want me to include Mister Hendrick among those I call if you came home?"

"Cover-up," Thomas said after considering the guys' reaction up to the point Henry arrived. "They were acting like what I'd done was their fault, like they would be held responsible or something. Henry's the only one who didn't seem to care about that. He sent them away, then went on about me doing the impossible. He was really excited about it, like me being able to teleport was something he was going to own."

"Okay, hearing the word brings the weirdness that seeing you do it didn't," Judith said.

"If he was excited about what happened," Eric said, "that raises the question of if he caused it."

Whatever he can do, Chima had said, is because we initiated him.

"No, I don't think he did." Limbani had been the one to push for him to join the frat. Henry had agreed. But as far as Thomas could see, he'd never been an instigator of anything Thomas had been involved in, other than the two of them having sex. "I think it's something the guys made happen. They were terrified we'd be found out. Henry... he said something about how he should have noticed the signs, but I don't know what that's about. I can only think of Grandpa's and the grease fire as places where I did it, so how could he have seen signs?"

"Enough," His mother said, making him sit on the bed. "We're not going to go anywhere just asking questions. Start with the events leading to the grease fire and tell us everything that happened."

"Mom, there's—" she silenced his whine with a finger on his lips. "No one in this family is going to be offended listening to your sexual exploits."

"I will," Roland muttered.

Thomas nodded. It wasn't like they hadn't listened to his mother recount numbers of her and his Dad's exploits. So she was probably right.

"Like I said, I was making funnel cake for the guys..."

Chapter 07

Minneapolis, January 13th

Thomas closed the oven door and went back to mixing the batter. The candied mints were coming along nicely. They'd make a perfect garnish for—

"What are you doing?" Limbani whispered in his ear, and Thomas barely held on the open flour bag as he startled. Catching his breath he glared at the monkey who gave him an innocent smile.

"Trying to make dessert for tonight."

"Yummy." The monkey undid Thomas's tail strap.

"You don't even know what I'm making," Thomas said, trying to keep the stern expression as a hand slipping under the waistband of his jeans and moving to the front.

"Everything that comes from you is tasty. I'd have you for dessert and it would be delicious." A slight tug and the jeans moved down, then gravity had them around his ankles.

"I doubt my cum's sweet enough to qualify as dessert." A quick glance around the kitchen confirmed starting the prep work early was paying off. The ingredients were ready to be mixed, barring another attempt at getting him to throw them in the air. The mints were at a low enough temperature that even forgetting about them for a bit wouldn't ruin them, and the oil was ready to go.

"That is a proposition that just asks to be tested." Then, Limbani melted around the rat and was on his knees, forcing him away from the counter. He hurriedly put the bag of flour down before he *accidentally* dropped it on the monkey's head. With a chuckle, Limbani ran a hand over the 'Kiss the Chef' embroidered in an old style cursive font. "Love the apron."

"That puts you kind of low for you're going to kiss me, doesn't it?" He noticed the clock. Okay, if he wanted everything to be ready in time, he couldn't just stop working because he was being distracted. Of course, Limbani would go for the one thing he'd forgotten to plan for when he'd prepared himself and the kitchen for his cooking. Pushing him away from the counter. The guys usually went for what was on display, not searching around for what else could be access.

Still, if there was one thing he'd learned in the months of being accepted within Sigma Theta Gamma, it was how to adapt to situations. Well, it was really how sex was an activity that wasn't to be kept to even private areas. But that came with having to adapt, if he wanted to get anything done.

Studying for finals had been interesting.

He spread his legs around the monkey, letting him adjust his balance and lean forward to could continue with the mixing.

"I like how you think," Limbani said, head now against the cabinet door and muzzle pressed into the apron-covered crotch. The motion of the mouth against Thomas's stiff cock to make him bite his lower lip, then the apron was up and over the monkey's head. His tongue lapped at the rat's balls, then the whole of his cock was in Limbanis' muzzle.

"Oh Balls," Thomas exclaimed, borrowing one of Madoc's many used curse. At least it was appropriate to the occasion. He reminded himself he had work to complete, unless he wanted to end up as the proffered dessert. As appealing as the easy of every guys in the frat having their way with him, again. He had promised himself he'd make this dish for them.

At least, the monkey had given him plenty of practice at doing—he moaned—anything while engage in a sexual thing. This was just one more to add to that list.

The hardest part of mixing the batter was that he needed both his hands to make it happen. Next time he was getting someone here to buy non-slip bowls. He had to fight the well trained reflex to grab the monkey's head so he could fuck his muzzle hard. He tried to convince himself it was to hurry this along so he could focus on the baking, but he also wanted to prove to the monkey this was nowhere enough of a distraction to mess up his cooking.

And really, as if hurrying this along would result in anything more than Limbani going to a second and third load.

He was cracking the last egg when he felt it coming. He had just enough control to open it over the bowl and drop the shell beside it before grabbing onto the counter and cuming. Limbani sucked it all eagerly and Thomas panted as the orgasm ran its course. Then found out the monkey wasn't satisfied as he kept on

sucking on Thomas's still hard cock.

"Leave room for dessert," Thomas whispered and the monkey snorted, then kept going.

His hand shook as he grabbed the whisk and the occasional full body shudder as his oversensitive cock kept on being sensitized almost made him drop it a few times. He forced his breath to slow and reminded himself he had won a Shoot-em Down death match while the monkey was blowing him, and this was a lot easier than picking his target on a screen.

He managed to turn the stovetop on, and to keep an eye on the readout of the digital thermostat clipped to the edge of the pot a few minutes before, and now, the batter looked to be properly smooth, with a minimal of spillage. We was now at the stage where he had to wait until the oil was at the right temperature so he could funnel the batter in. It left his hands free to—

"The funnel!" Thomas cursed, looking for where he'd put it, when being pinned in place by a monkey suctioning the cum out of his balls hadn't crossed his mind. He located it on the counter, that was good, but out of easy reach.

Getting the monkey to slide enough Thomas could reach it proved an adventure, it didn't even occur to him to ask for him to pause for the second it would take, and when he was in position by the stove again, the oil was at the right temperature.

He had a one cake's worth in the funnel, his hand shaking over the oil as the batter poured into it, when he felt it approaching again. "Oh fuck," He whispered, trying to hold it back, he couldn't just drop the funnel and obey his body's demand for another release, that would splash oil and—

"Careful there," Yating whispered in his ear, and this time the startlement helped distract him from the impending, and the red panda's hand holding the funnel kept that from flying. "How about we keep that in the bowl until you can focus on whatever you're making?"

Thomas thanks were cut short by the slick cock pushing in his ass and the orgasm that triggered. When the starts went away, he was amazed to see the funnel was in the batter bowl and not one extra drop of batter was on the counter.

Limbani finished draining his balls, while Yating slowly pounded the rat's ass, then extricated himself. "I'd love to go for a third serving," he say, rubbing the back of his head. "But not at the cost of what that panda action is going to do to my head, and the cabinet door."

"You're welcome to fill me," the panda said.

There was the sound of a hand slapping an ass. "Currently, I'm hungry, so I'm going to go look for another pre meal meal to munch on." Then Limbani was out of the kitchen.

Yating wrapped his arms around Thomas's stomach. "I guess I should put the filling the monkey sucked out of you back in," he whispered in his ear, before licking it and picking up the pace.

Thomas let out a moan-mixed curse and closed his eyes, holding onto the counter. He'd cook the cakes tomorrow, he decided. If that meant he was dessert tonight, so be it, he'd endure it.

The panda's cock moved in and out, a well oiled piston in a casing made to feel it. Thomas moaned, tightening his ass and increasing the sensation. He decide there was something wonderful about being fucked among the smell of frying food.

He gasped as Yating closed a hand on his cock, stroking it. He tried thrusting in it but the panda held him in place, unwilling to relinquish any of the control. Thomas whined in need. He was getting close to this third orgasm, but Yating seemed to sense it and was keeping him on the edge.

The smell of oil became stronger as The panda continued to edge him on. Enough Thomas wondered if he's somehow spilled some in his fur as he prepared everything.

Except, that couldn't be right, the oil had only gone in the pan, and that was on the stove, so it couldn't splash—

"Fuck!" his eyes snapped open, but before he could do more, the flash of light blinded him, and the heat seared his eyes shut again.

He didn't want to burn!

He was in freefall, then landing on something soft, then nothing.

* * * * *

Thomas woke to an orgasm and the voice of someone else groaning over him. Then the cock in his ass pulsed. The waves of his orgasm match those of the pulsing cock, and something resembling thought manifested.

"Oh fuck," He groans, "did I need that."

"Well, there's your answer," Laurence said in what sound like too close to panic for the situation to

Thomas. "What the fuck do we do now?"

Fuck me again? Thomas tried to ask, but the guy's cock pulled out and instead of Yating rolling off him, it was Hubert. The collie looked at him concerned.

How as he switched partner without noticing, he and Yating had been— "The fire!" He was out of bed and heading for the door, but Limbani push back to th bed. The bed? How had he... what was he doing in his room?

"Gil took care of it."

Why was half the frat in his room? How long had been out? Had they just used him while he couldn't say anything. "Yating," he asked, forcing his ming to get back on important matters. "Is he okay? The flash fire... and I..."

The panda was seated on his computer chair, eyeing Thomas with a mix of awe and fear. What? Why? Again, he needed to force his mind back and he studied Yating. He looked fine, not even signed fur.

Thomas looked down at himself, fearful of what he'd see, he had taken the brunt of the fire and... He was fine? He ran a hand through his fur. It felt fine, he didn't hurt anywhere.

"How did you pull us out before we were burned?" he asked Limbani. The monkey had been the last one there, so he had to... only Yating had taken his time, and Limbani had said he was going to one of the others.

The silence unnerved Thomas, as did the way they were looking at him.

Madoc opened his mouth, but what he wanted to say was buried as the other all spoke at once and the only thing Thomas was able to pick up from any of it was the tone.

Clear and unrestrained accusation.

"I didn't mean to start the fire," Thomas told them, but it was like they weren't listening, just—

"Shut up!" The deep and booming voice of the Hyena silenced the room. He glanced at Thomas, then Madoc. "You're missing the important detail." The cacophony was engaged again, but this time aimed at Chima.

Thomas eyed the open door, but Gilbert stood in it. Even if he wasn't paying any attention to the rat, Gilbert would keep him from leaving. There was something deliberate in the armadillo standing there, blocking the only way out.

"Shut up!" Chima yelled again, and this time the silence was more tenuous. "Whatever Thomas did, it's because we initiated him." The silence gained a firmness that confused Thomas.

"Bullshit," Felix said. "We only did the ceremony of submission, and only as a joke."

"That's the one we did intentionally," Chima agreed. "But at the Freshman party, is there anyone here Thomas didn't suck off?"

"That's not how it works," Felix protested, but the other were looking at one another. Thomas had sucked all thirteen guys at the party, not that remembered anyone past Limbani, Herbert and Olavo, and even the capybara was kind of vague.

"Is there anyone Thomas didn't fuck during the exam week?" Chima asked, ignoring the otter's protest.

That, Thomas remembered quite well. Fucking everyone in the frat had been an experience, especially that final fuck, Chima.

"I don't know how," the hyena said, "luck, instinct, or His—" he snapped his mouth shut and looked at Thomas worriedly. "Somehow, he's gone through all three ceremonies."

The silence stretched only for a few second before Firmin spoke. "That's impossible. There hasn't been a foundling in centuries." Somehow, that started the arguing again.

Since it wasn't about him this time, as far as he could tell, he decided to get out of there, regardless of whatever objection the armadillo might have. He needed space and a shower. He could still smell oil in his fur and he wanted that out.

He stood, and his legs buckled out from under him. Laurence caught him from behind and deposited him back on the bed.

"That's enough," Olavo said. His voice wasn't loud, but it held enough authority they others turned to him. "Where's Henry? We need him for this."

"He's—" Gilbert started.

"We need everyone here," Felix said. "If—" he stared at Chima. "—if this is what it is, he's broken rules. That's for an elder to deal with. I'll call mine."

"No." Olavo snatched the phone out of Madoc's hand. While Felix had been talking about calling

someone, Madoc has started on it. “This isn’t family business, it’s ours. It’s Sigma Theta Gamma business.”

“Olavo, I can’t keep this from Raphael,” Madoc said, an edge of panic in his voice. “Thomas has two brothers and two nephews.”

“Which is why we need to know for sure what happened,” Olavo replied. “And we need Henry for that. He’d figure things out, and he’ll get the elders involved. The last thing we need,” he added as Felix and Madoc opened his mouth, “if for us to be responsible for sparking a conflict between the Richards and the Lewiston.”

“Henry’s not picking up,” Laurence said, phone to his ear.

“He’s at the dean’s,” Gilbert said. “Something to do with the house’s standing.”

The capybara nodded. “Gil, you’re dressed, so you go get him. I think this is more important.” He looked at the others. “Until then, everyone out, except Limbani. You are not letting him get out of your sight, is that clear? And fuck him until he’s able to walk straight again.”

Firmin’s snicker was cut short by the capybara’s glare.

* * * * *

Thomas was walking—he wasn’t acknowledging the inadvertent joke—after the fifth fuck. The sex had been energetic, and it always was with the monkey, but Limbani had been odd through out it. Like he was worried Thomas would just vanish, or he wasn’t sure he was even there while he was pounding his ass.

The sixth had happened in the showers, him and Limbani and no one else. Thomas had had to insist and point out he smelled like he’d be doused with oil. He’d caught Kuno looking in, also with an odd expression, while there. So whatever was going on was spreading to those he hadn’t been present.

When Limbani returned him to his room, Jacques and Hubert were there, and there was an argument when the monkey said he needed to deal with something. It was pointed out Olavo had told him to stay with Thomas, and the monkey replied with a ‘he’s not my elder,’ in a tone that Thomas didn’t think he’d ever heard the monkey use.

He hadn’t thought Limbani could get angry. The anger vanished as he looked at Thomas, and as the monkey opened his mouth, the rat thought he’d finally get an answer to what this was, but it closed before any words left it and, looking apologetic, left. Hubert ushered Thomas back in his room with instructions to stay there until Henry was back.

Thomas considered pushing his way past and going after Limbani, maybe if he insisted the monkey would tell him whatever he’d been about to. The thought vanished as the collie’s expression became firm. No matter how much training he’d undergone under Madoc’s tutelage, and how unassuming Hubert looked compared to the other wall of muscles in the frat. The collie was stronger than Thomas.

He dropped onto his bed with the door closing.

This was getting beyond strange. What was so unusual about him sucking each of them, all of them fucking him? Well, okay, the thing in the basement had been a little odd, but still, there was no way he was the only one who had fucked each and everyone of them. Limbani, if no one else had done everything with everyone.

He sighed. Maybe that was what they all need. For Thomas to fuck them until they remembered he wasn’t some oddity off the street, but a brother. He eyed the door. His jailers weren’t going to let that happen. With nothing else to do, he reached for his phone on the nightstand and frown when it wasn’t there. Looking around he didn’t see it, then remembered it had been where he always kept it, clipped to his belt, which meant with his pants, which, since they weren’t here, were still in the kitchen.

With a sigh, he went to the window. He wasn’t sure if he’d wanted to call Paul for a rescue, tell him what was going on, or just chat and be distracted while this was resolved.

He watched the snow fall. It was intensifying. Before lunch, this was going to turn into a full on storm. He looked down. He was only two stories up. The snow was thick enough under his window that it would soften his landing.

The angle gave him a sight of his cock.

Right, he was naked. No jumping out the window in the fur in the middle of January storm or no storm. Well, he was in his room, so he could fix that, and then decide if he wanted to run.

He was putting on the t-shirt when the door opened and Henry entered. He closed it behind and assessed the room before fixing his gaze on Thomas. The rat steeled himself. Based on the other’s reaction, the bat could start screaming too.

Instead, Henry rubbed the top of his muzzle and let out a sigh. “It’s my fault. I got so focused on your role as the outsider welcomed into our home, I never considered you might be something else.” He chuckled.

“Not with the way you freaked out anytime you caught one of them doing something magical.”

Thomas opened his mouth to ask what Henry was talking about, but the bat kept on going. “There were signs. Your sex drive and unending energy. You never bought it up because you just assumed it was something about living in the frat, since everyone here is like that, and I figure that one of them was boosting you on the side, more than one of them. Still...”

When he didn’t continue, Thomas asked. “Is that supposed to make any sense?” what freak outs? And who did magic?

Henry smiled. “No, I don’t suppose it does. Still, it’s easy to take care of this.” He motioned for Thomas to come to him and opened his arms, taking the rat into a hug when Thomas walked into them

The gesture was the definition of comfort. How many times had Henry hugged him after a long day, a stressful exam, or just because Thomas had needed a hug? The bat has a sixth sense about those things.

Henry nuzzled his neck and Thomas smiled. Of course, hugs often lead to something more, which was comforting too.

“No,” Thomas said in annoyance as he felt the scrape of teeth against his skin. How many times did he have to tell the bat he didn’t like this. “Damn it.” He opened his eyes, caught sight of something off the turned-off screen. Then he had his hand on his neck, turning when it came away with blood. “You know how I feel about—”

What was Henry doing on the other side of the room?

The bat turned to face him, licking the blood off his sharp incisors. He looked annoyed, but more importantly, he was still by the door where they’d hugged.

How had Thomas gotten to the other side of the room?

Thomas let out a sigh, this one sounding mildly frustrated. “I’m going to need more than a drop to fix this, Thomas.” The shake of the head that followed was a mix of amused and disbelieving. “Under my roof all this time and no one knew. Not even you.” He smiled, and that, along with the accompanying glint in the bat’s eyes, made Thomas want to edge away even more than he was. “Do you have any idea the thing someone like you will let me do?”

“Henry.” Thomas’s tail curled around his leg. “You’re starting to sound way to creepy for me to want to be in this room with you.”

The bat waved that aside. “I’ll fix that too. By the time I’m done, it’s going to be right as rain.” He chuckled. “Well, right as I decide it’ll be. You are going to be a hoot. Having you pop all over the place is going to give Firmin quite the run for his money when it comes to entertaining me.”

Pop around? Why was Henry talking like this craziness was real?

But how had Thomas gotten to the other side of the room?

Could Thomas be who had gotten him and Yating out of the explosion unharmed?

“Come here,” Henry said with another motion to joining him. “I’ll give you a hug and it’s all going to be fine. I’ll even let you remember the fuck this time, I promise. There’s no need to hide that, since you’re once of us.”

“I don’t think so,” Thomas said, talking a step back, and wishing his room was larger, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get far enough from the bat to feel safe as things were. “Tell you what. I’m going to head home and you guys can work out whatever this craziness. You can call me once it’s resolved or, you know, I can just stay there.”

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.” Henry opened his arms wide. “You have no idea what you represent. You can do the impossible. Everyone claimed that only the gods could do what you did. I’m not letting you go.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Thomas replied, having to fight not to scream it. “You are all crazy.”

“No, it just sounds like that to you because you don’t know the truth yet.” Henry lowered an arm, leaving the other one as an invitation for Thomas to take it. “Let me show you.”

Thomas rubbed his face. “Do you have any idea how crazy you—” he looked at the bat, who’d managed to cover half the distance in that second. His teeth were bare and promised to bite into his flesh.

The door? No, closed, on the other side of Henry.

The window? He could jump out.” He glanced at it, the other side of the street. The houses there. The fall would—

Fuck it was cold!

He spun around in the falling snow, trying to understand what had just happened? On the other side of the street was the frat house, where Henry appeared in his bedroom window, looked around then locked eyes with Thomas.

Thomas didn't wait to understand that look.
Thomas ran.

Chapter 08

Minneapolis, January 13th

“Then I was running around the city to get here.” The last part had gotten his ears to stop burning, but hearing himself say how Henry had acted, the things he’d said, made him realize just how insane it all sounded.

But he’d also realized something else. He didn’t like it, but... “I’m going to have to go back to the frat.”

“No,” Eric said.

“Dad, they know what’s going on. They know what happened to me.”

“They lied and said you are on drugs, Thomas,” His mother said. “They insisted we call them as soon as we saw you. Why would they do that if they are your friends?”

“Maybe they’re just worried about how it’ll look for them if I tell people they did this to me. I’m sure they’ll calm down once I tell them I’m not going to talk to anyone about this.”

“According to what you said,” his father said, “Henry didn’t sound worried. He talked about using you, what you could do.”

Thomas nodded. That hadn’t sounded like Henry at all. Maybe he’d been replaced? The idea would sound insane if he hadn’t teleported half a dozen times on the way here.

“Maybe he just got overly excited. He said I’d done the impossible. He’s had time to calm down. I’m sure he’s going to be reasonable now. He’s always been really supportive and helpful.”

Eric shook his head. “I’ve been looking into the families that are part of Sigma Theta Gamma and—”

“Dad,” Thomas said, unable to keep the whine out of his voice. “I can’t believe you’ve been investigating them just because I live at the frat.”

“That’s not why I did it, Thomas.” His father took a deep breath. “While you were in the hospital during the holidays, after we found out in the grotto, Ettore convinced me not to contact the authorities. His arguments kind of made sense at the time; and you woke up, so I didn’t feel like pushing. But once we got home from my father’s I started wondering why he’d think he could be the reason for what happened to you.”

Thomas nodded, remembering his future uncle-in-law asking him about what had happened when it was only the two of them in the hospital room. His insistence that Thomas could tell him anything about the people who had done this to him. That Ettore could protect him and his family.”

“Did you know that the Lewistons have been tied to stuff that’s happened in Denver?”

Thomas shook his head. He hadn’t even known ‘stuff’ had happened there. What reason did he have to know anything about that city?

“They were almost wiped out a few years ago in some attack. I couldn’t get the details. It’s like they’ve been erased, but the number of death couldn’t. I also looked into the Richards. Your friend Kuno, his family is a lot more than ‘tight with the police’ as that Rowling boy said. They have people in all levels of politics across the state.”

“How about Yating?” Judith asked while Thomas tried to take in what his father said.

Kuno had never said anything about his family being political. Not that he had a reason. Unlike Felix Chouteau, the margay didn’t brag about how important his family was.

“I’ve confirmed their estate is quite large, but it’s difficult to get more personal information on them since they are in Taiwan. It does confirm they are rich.”

“You knew that already, dad,” Thomas protested. “It was like the first thing you told me when you found out I’d been accepted into the frat and offered a room. How they’re rich and we’re not.”

“That is not what I said, Thomas.”

“It’s what you meant.”

“But you’re only a Freshman,” Nadia said, placing a hand on Eric’s arm. “Doesn’t it make you wonder why they let you move there when they should have waited until next year?”

Thomas shrugged. “They had the room. Limbani, Kuno, and Laurence are also Freshmen.”

“But you aren’t from one of those families, Thomas,” Eric said, sounding calmer. “My concern now isn’t about the wealth difference anymore, but about how they might have acquired that wealth. And if my worries are justified, just how far would they go to get you back.”

Roland snorted and earned himself stares. “What? All they have to do is get one of them to show his

ass or his cock and Thomas is going to go running to them.”

“Roland!” Nadia exclaimed in her patented chastising tone. “Now is not the time for jealousy.”

“I’m not,” his brother protested, then looked away under their mother’s stare and mumbled. “Sorry.”

Thomas was too stunned by the statement to listen to what his father was saying. Roland, jealous of him? Why? His brother was way better looking. At sixteen and one of the regular MVPs of his football team, the girls had to be lined up at his locker for a chance to spend time with him.

“Thomas?” Eric called. “Are you listening?”

“Of course,” Thomas replied reflexively, then he was the one looking away. “Sorry, I wasn’t.”

“Right now, You’re going to spend the night here, in your bed. Tomorrow, I’m sending you to your grandfather. Bozeman is far enough I doubt they’ll think to look for you there while I settled this.”

“Dad, there’s no—”

“This is final, Thomas.” His father’s expression softened. “I need you to be safe, Thomas. My dad will make sure you are.”

Thomas nodded. “Okay, Dad.” He stood. “I’m going to go grab a shower, then go to bed.”

Outside of his room, Judith took his arm and lowered her voice. “Do you think Yating’s involved in what’s happening to you?”

“Judith,” Thomas protested. “I—”

“If he is, you tell me and I am going to kick his ass.”

Thomas smiled at the reminder of how protective of her family his sister was. “I don’t know. He did look guilty when he left my room, but he was who had distracted me in the kitchen, so maybe the fire was what that was about.”

She nodded. “The next time he wants to go out with me, I’m going to get him to tell me everything. Dad can do all the investigating he wants, but I know how to get a guy to talk.”

Thomas had seen enough guys come crawling to his sister after they’d screwed up to believe her. Yating might have an advantage in that being bi meant he wasn’t dependent on his sister for satisfaction, but Judith was a Royer, as well as a Hertz, and as a group, Royer women were... something.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, January 14th

“Mom,” Roland complained as Nadia put the backpack next to Thomas’s chair. “Those are mine.”

“You have ample clothing, Roland. Right now, your brother can use some for his trip.”

Thomas looked at his plate, instead of the glare his brother had to be giving him. He was already wearing one of his shirts and a pair of jeans since those Thomas had arrived in were still in the wash. In the previous evening’s excitement, they’d forgotten they were the only thing in the house that fit him, so they’d stayed by the bed.

Thomas had been surprised about how not loose Roland’s shirt had been. His brother was more muscular from years of weight training for the football games.

“I thought you were buying him clothing on the way,” Judith said.

“I was, but someone was quite convincing in how risky that was.”

Thomas looked at his father, who was reading on his phone while eating.

“And I get thanked by losing half my clothes,” Roland grumbled.

Thomas stared at his brother. He’d been who had come to his defense? “How is getting me clothes on the way to the bus station risky?”

Roland rolled his eyes. “They’ll have hired people to watch for you getting clothes, duh.”

“How would they..”

“Mad knows how much you’ve outgrown everything,” his brother said. Thomas didn’t like that Roland called Madoc by his nickname, the way every one of the rat’s ‘projects’ did. Except for Thomas. No matter how insistent Madoc got at times, Thomas had been raised to show respect by using people’s names. He’d thought the lessons their parents taught them would have stuck to his brother.

“...and since they’re all richer than anyone. It’s nothing for them to give money around, so every clothing store is watched,” his brother concluded.

Their mother placed Roland’s high school winter jacket on the back of Thomas’s chair. Roland glared, but stayed silent. Thomas remained quiet, too. He should protest, but the jacket in his bedroom closet hadn’t grown to match the muscles he’d gained since moving into the frat anymore than his pants had. Madoc had complained that his hospital stay had cost Thomas a lot of his muscle mass, but it couldn’t have been that

much after all.

Thomas finished eating, then help with cleanup. Then Judith came back from her walk.

"I didn't see The Rowling's van or pickup anywhere, not Kuno's Ascendant or the otter's BMW either. That's as good as we're going to get for being sure they aren't watching us."

Thomas chuckled at the idea Felix would ever drive his expensive car in this neighborhood. He'd be afraid it would drop in value faster just being around so many middle-class vehicles. There was still the danger of them renting a car, or, like Roland had pointed out, paying someone to watch them, but his mother had a plan for that too.

Thomas put Roland's jacket on, and she added his high school cap. Adjusting it to ensure it was over the spot on the back of his head where Roland had a bit of white in his fur where Thomas's was all black. Other than that, the only way their fur differed was in where the black of their upper body changed to white around their waist, and that would require Thomas being out of his shirt for anyone to see.

"We're going to be back in a few hours," Eric told Roland. "Please stay off the internet until we do. Don't slot your phone in anything that's connected. You made a good point about them paying people, and they could have done the same to watch our online activities. If they see you online when they think you're in the car with me—"

"Yeah-yeah. I'll just jerk off until you get back."

Nadia patted his shoulder. "If you need material, your father's collection is—"

"Mom!"

"Nadia!"

She looked from her son to her husband. "You should learn to share, love."

Thomas had to admire his mother as he couldn't remember ever seeing his father's ear that bright.

"I don't need an old man's porn stash," Roland grumbled. "I have my own."

"Mine isn't all digital," Eric replied. "Wait, did you call me old?"

"Better run," Judith said, snickering.

"Your phone," Eric said, his hand before Thomas.

"Come on dad. There's no way they did anything to it, it was only a few hours before they brought it back."

"And in those hours we don't know what did to it."

"Dad, there is not one computer major at the house. Even Olavo, who took one because of his economic's course, wouldn't know how to plant a tracker in a phone."

"But they have more money than anyone."

Roland groaned.

"And that can let them pay someone to make your phone insecure. It's safer for you to leave it here."

"How am I going to call Grandpa when I get to Bozeman?"

"I'll call him from the administrative building tomorrow. I'll have your arrival time there and he'll be waiting for you."

"What am I going to do while on the bus?" Thomas complained.

"Have dad give you one of his not digital porn thing," Roland offered.

"Eww, not on the bus," Thomas replied. "There's other people."

"There you go," Judith said.

"It's in public!"

"Not really," Eric offered. "The seats are high, and it isn't like a lot of people take the bus anymore, so —" he looked at his children. "What, didn't me and your mother tell you about that time we went to a concert in Portland, and my parents wouldn't let me borrow the car?"

"No!" Thomas said forcefully, knowing such a realization would follow with the telling of the story.

"No." Judith's tone was more one of dismay that there was a story she hadn't heard.

Roland stayed out of it.

"Now we have to look forward to once this is behind us," Nadia said, taking Thomas's hand in hers. Feeling the paper against his palm stopped his protest. He stared at the five twenty-dollar bills when she moved her hand away.

"How?" he asked, having trouble getting the word out. The only place he'd seen physical money was in movies. As far as he'd known, digital was the only way to pay for anything anymore.

"Oh, honey." She placed a hand on his cheek. "You still have so much to learn about the real world."

"I suppose this trip will do that for you," Eric said. "A small taste of adulthood before you have to

confront it after graduation. Are you sure you aren't coming, Judith?"

"I'll make sure Roland doesn't cause any trouble."

Roland and Thomas snorted in unison.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, January 14th

Thomas looked out the window at the snow passing.

No phone meant no way to use the screen on the back of the seat in front of him. How was he expected to survive the next twenty hours or so with nothing to do? He stretched to look in the aisle. His father had been right. The bus was only half full and everyone was seated in the front. He had the whole rear to himself.

He could even—

Nope.

Not going there. He could go twenty hours without his cock getting any attention.

He looked outside again.

Which meant that all he had to occupy him was looking outside at the snowbanks. That and thinking.

Why was this happening? Why was it happening to him, of all people? Thomas was no one special. He was just an undecided freshman muddling his way through university. He wasn't even the sexual raconteur that everyone in his family was on account of the Royer's blood running through their veins.

Maybe he was adopted?

That would explain a lot.

No, if he was, his parents would have told him.

Unless he was an alien, and they'd found him in a pod on the side of the road after a storm.

No, that was a movie, he thought. Something Roland's best friend had brought over at some point.

He sighed and rested his head against the window.

Why him?

Why had Limbani picked him out of everyone at college to bring into the frat? Had he known about this? Was that why? He did always say he knew things. Claimed it was how he'd known where to find Thomas that first time in that restroom.

Was that why he'd made the offer once they were done?

What would have happened if Thomas had said no?

Chapter 09

Minneapolis, September, 15th

The stall's door burst open and before Thomas could greet his best friend, who'd agreed to meet him for some fun, the monkey grabbed him, turned, and pinned him against the now-closed door.

"Lim—"

The monkey's mouth on his stopped the question, the tongue pushing between the lips, stopped the reason for even asking the question. The hand on his crotch, while it undid the belt and the one on his ass working the tail strap, stopped thought altogether. It only reengage at the sensation of his underwear ripping off his body, and Thomas tried to push the monkey away, only resulting in freeing his mouth.

"Dude, what's wrong with you?"

Limbani blinked, stared at him, then stepped back, shocked, and Thomas wondered at the reaction. If he came on this strong all the time, he couldn't be the first one to ask for an explanation partway.

His gaze became distant before focusing on Thomas again. "Don't you..." the question trailed off as the monkey pointed to Thomas's hard cock. "don't we..."

Had Thomas broken the monkey's mind by stopping things, because he was pretty sure Limbani had remained fluent while being more preoccupied during the Freshman party.

"Yes, I'm horny," Thomas said, pointing out the obvious. The exposed obvious. "And yes, I'd be fine with you sucking me off—" he grabbed the monkey by the shoulders before he dove onto his cock like it was the last meal on Earth. "But aren't you going to at least apologize for destroying my underwear?"

Limbani blinked, then got the faraway look again, wincing before focusing on him again. The monkey gave him a puppy-eyed look he had no right to be able to produce. "Sorry?"

The uncertainty only added to the endearness of the moment, and Thomas let go of him. How was he supposed to stay mad when Limbani looked like that? If he could pull that look on-demand, it explained the need for a minder when he was out and about.

Thomas sighed and moved his hands, but the monkey kept looking at him with those big sad eyes. He had to be breaking laws using that on another person. "Go ahead."

The first word was just out of his mouth that Limbani was dropping. The last ended in a grown as the monkey took his entire cock in one go. It felt like the mouth as fallen on it as he'd dropped to his knees. Thomas's body arched in pleasure, his head banging against the door as Limbani swallowed around his cock before starting to bob.

"Oh, fuck." Thomas's head hit the door again as his eyes rolled. Was the monkey's mouth a vacuum or something? Any time he pulled up, Thomas felt like his cock was being pulled off and when he came down, it was like he was sucking all the way to his balls.

No, that was the hand pulling and massaging them.

Maybe.

How was Thomas supposed to know when he wasn't even sure what else, but the pleasure existed anymore? The pleasure diminished as Limbani slowed his sucking, making Thomas moan as he deep throated him again, but then went painfully slow as he pulled up, and kept pulling up and more of Thomas's cock was exposed to the cool air.

Then Limbani looked up with a mischievous expression and Thomas had hold of his head. There was no way he was letting his cock get out of that amazing muzzle. He shoved his cock back in, and the monkey moaned in time with him.

Limbani placed both hands on Thomas's ass and the rat thrust in and out of the monkey's hot, wet, pleasurable muzzle. Then it turned into a vacuum again and Thomas had to work at pulling back and, oh fucking God, did it feel good. He slammed in and pulled again, mouth hanging open. Being able to do that couldn't be any more legal than those puppy eyes.

The tongue proved to be too much. It wrapped around Thomas's cock as he was pulling out, adding sensation to the underside and then the crown, and the rat was screaming as he slammed in, unloading in the monkey's throat, and the fucker was swallowing around his cock, which only made it more intense.

It lasted... his mind couldn't register time anymore. What was time, anyway? All that mattered was the

pleasure of that mouth, the orgasm, the—

Thomas's knees nearly buckled as Limbani pull off him, panting, but keeping a hand on the rat's stomach while the bones reformed in his legs.

"Okay, I'd been worried there for a second," Limbani said, sitting on the toilet once Thomas was no longer in danger of flopping into a boneless mess. "But that's the Party Thomas I remember."

Thomas chuckled through his panting. At least someone remembered what he'd been like. He'd have to quiz the monkey about it later. When he could breathe steadily, he asked. "What are you doing here?"

The monkey tilted an ear and motioned to the rat's crotch and his mouth.

"I mean, how did you even know I was here? The plan was for me and Paul to meet up...did he tell you? Was that how he planned on taking care of me?" Thomas wasn't sure if he wanted to be pissed or grateful. He had been looking forward to Paul returning the favor for Thomas sucking him off on the drive back from the Freshman party, even if Thomas had no memory of the event. But this had been... he had no idea how to describe it.

"I told you at the party, I know things." The grin fell as uncertainty crept up. "You were waiting for Paul?" he bit his lower lip and suddenly seemed younger. "I guess Henry's right and I shouldn't take it for granted." The grin returned. "But you were here. You fucked my face and came like a pro. So my perfect track record stands."

"What?" He couldn't be serious about that knowing who he was going to have sex with thing. "Look, if you aren't here because Paul sent you, you need to clear out." Hopefully, the golden tiger wasn't going to be disappointed that Thomas would suck him off instead of the reverse, but then again. There would be another time with the way the rat was always horny these days.

"Oh, okay." Limbani motioned for Thomas to move away from the door and reached for it. "Oh, your cock almost made me forget." He grinned. "I had another reason to seek you out."

Thomas narrowed his eyes.

"We want you to join the frat." The monkey grinned.

"Wait what?"

The grin fell slightly. "You are looking for a frat to join, right? Paul said..."

"Yeah, but what about that exclusivity Sigma Theta Gamma's known for? The reason you were able to get a room there even being a Freshman?"

"Oh," Limbani said that like he'd had a revelation. "Well, after your performance at the party, we all agreed you could join."

"Everyone? A dozen guys all agreed, just like that?"

"Thirteen, don't you remember sucking us off?"

"Vaguely," Thomas said and got a tilted ear.

"There was some resistance, but after talking it over all week last week, we agreed that we could bend the rule a little for someone with your level of... eagerness."

Thomas's disbelief fought with his excitement. "I'm allowed to join the frat?"

The monkey nodded, smiling, "which includes moving it now."

Thomas's disbelief cranked up. "Okay, what's the catch?"

The smile broadened and Thomas thought he could add feline on top of canine to the monkey's species. "Well, it's a tradition that everyone joining the frat has gone through a... ceremony. It's not a requirement of the frat itself, it's... well, something else, but the diehards argued that we can't let anyone in who hasn't had that ceremony, so..."

"That sounds suspiciously like a hazing."

"It isn't."

"Yeah, I'm going to need some information if I'm going to risk that."

Limbani sighed and got that distant look again and winced. He held up his finger and Thomas closed his mouth on asking if he was okay. Then it was the beaming smile that kept him from checking.

Limbani placed a finger in Thomas's black chest fur. "Here's what I can tell you."

He ran the finger down. "Consider the kind of guys we are. The stories you've heard about us, and the party you attended." The finger reached the dividing line between the black fur above and white below and kept going to the base of the rat's stiffening cock. "Now imagine what we would think of for a ceremony to determine if you are worthy of joining."

Thomas swallowed at the images that popped in his head as the finger now caressed the length of his rock-hard cock.

The monkey leaned in and whispered. "Do you really care if someone would call what we'll do to you a hazing?"

Hazing was just a word, anyway, right? "When?" he squeaked, as the finger ran down the underside of his cock.

"This Saturday at six work from you?"

Thomas shivered as the finger caressed its way over his balls. He nodded. He wasn't trusting his voice, even with just that one word.

"Good." The finger was gone. "I'll see you then." The monkey was out of the stall as the golden tiger entered the bathroom. "I've primed him for you, handsome," Limbani told a mildly confused Paul. "Enjoy."

Paul stepped to the open stall, looked down, and Thomas saw the remains of his underwear on the floor. The golden tiger tilted an ear. "When you messaged me because you really needed to get off, I didn't think you were talking the 'two guys sucking you off' kind of needy."

Thomas grabbed Paul by the collar and pulled him into the stall as what he'd agreed to undergo sunk in. "I have to survive a week of anticipating something that might put the party to shame. I don't care what you're going to need me to do, Paul, but I'm going to need your help keeping my balls from exploding until then."

The tiger quirked a smile. "What can be happening that's going to be keeping you on edge that badly until then?"

"I've been offered a room in the Sigma Theta Gamma Frat house."

The surprise gave way to amused understanding. "And you're imagining everything that'll happen once you're there."

Thomas's mouth dropped. His imagination hadn't even made it past his initiation. He moaned in need, his cock twitching at the thought that was only going to be the start of his fun.

Chapter 10

Moorhead, MN, January 13th

Thomas jerked awake and looked around, trying to remember why he was seated instead of in his bed.

The bus hit another pothole that nearly threw him out of the seat.

“You okay?” the wombat seated on the other side of the aisle asked as she put juggled the laptop the bump had nearly sent off her lap.

Thomas nodded.

Right, running from Henry and his frat brothers. Reaching his parents. Now he was on his way to his grandfather.

Another pothole and he exchanged a look with her. Was anyone maintaining the roads? Where were they, anyway? The last stop had been Alexandria, where the wombat had gotten on. How long ago was that? He reached for his phone; except he didn't have it. His father had worried it could be tracked.

He looked outside, and it was snow in the lowering sunlight. On the horizon, he saw indications of a city and also ahead of them; if he craned his neck. A sign for Moorhead came into view as the bus slowed. He worked out the distances, so he'd slept for a couple of hours.

“We'll be stopping for fifteen minutes to take on packages and let off a few people. If anyone wants to stretch their legs or get snacks, there's a convenience store, but be back on time. The next time will be in roughly three hours after we're moving again.”

By the time the driver finished speaking, they were on the ramp, then it was a right, and immediately into the parking lot of the charging station and convenience store.

As people stood, Thomas got comfortable in his seat, since he didn't feel a need to get out in the cold, but then saw the fast-food restaurant across from the store and his stomach reminded him that the sandwich his father had bought him in Forest Lake had been many hours ago and that he'd opted to stay in the bus in Alexandria.

He put the jacket on after confirming he had the money his mother gave him and as he scooted to the aisle, a commotion in the front made him look around the seatback and immediately pull back. A man was pushing his way onto the bus.

With the last twenty-four hours he'd had, he couldn't think of one reason for something to force his way onto the bud. He peeked around again. The man was showing his phone to the driver. Thomas had a sense of mass under the overcoat. Something expensive, the kind of thing Felix might wear and brag about.

Thomas couldn't see the driver, but the man's body language wasn't happy when he said something over his shoulder to the outside. Thomas was about to move to look at who else was there when the wombat took the man's hand and looked at the phone. She nodded to something the man said and pointed to the back.

Thomas was against the window. There was no doubt about it anymore. His luck kept on sucking. He looked up and wondered why he'd put his pack in the overhead compartment. It was only more clothes, but if he was going to run again, he wanted extras, since he had no way to know when he'd make it to his grandfather's place.

He'd have to stand, which would make him visible, but it was an easy latch, and there was nothing else so he could pull his pack and teleport away.

Right. Only if he could get it to work that easily. It wasn't like he'd gotten in any practice after the demonstration to his family. He glanced around the seat again in the hope the man had stepped outside to wait for him to exit, then he was against the wall.

Nope. The man was coming up the aisle. A weasel with gray fur splotched with brown. He didn't look threatening, but Thomas wasn't taking any chances anymore. He had to get out of the bus now.

He looked out the window, searching for somewhere to teleport to that would be safe from them. There were apartment buildings beyond the roundabout, closer was the convenience store, with cars at the charging station and people. Two of whom wore similar overcoats to the one the weasel had on, and there was the side of the store right there that would keep Thomas out of sight.

This was insane. He should teleport as far as possible.

But if he could listen in on their conversation, he could find out he was wrong, then get back on the

bus and make it to his grandfather comfortable and warm. Right, because this guy was just walking up the aisle to ask him about the weather.

But if..

Fuck it, he needed off the bus first, then he could teleport further after that if he had to.

He focused on the side of the store and willed himself there.

Come on! He was already scared the guy was going to get him, and there wasn't going anything good happening from this. Why wasn't his chest tightening, the shive—

He dropped to the cold ground and got to his feet, zipping the jacket shut. Fuck, it was even colder here than it had been in Minneapolis. Hand in his pocket, he moved to the edge.

"No," the man by the car said on his phone. "Walter's inside. That he's not out yet is a good sign."

The weasel exited the bus holding Thomas' pack.

"Is coming, give me a second." He lowered the phone. "Well?"

"He was there." The weasel raised the pack. "One of the passengers pointed me to where he was seated, but he wasn't there when I got to it."

"You think he got off at the previous stop?"

"No, she said he was still there."

"How did he get off the bus without you seeing him?"

"Did you see him get out the window?" the weasel asked.

"Of course not. You think I'd be here on the phone if I'd seen him run?"

"Then I have no idea how he pulled off that magic trick."

With a sigh, the man put the phone to his ear. "I'm sorry, Mister Richard. He was on the bus, but we missed him. No, I have no idea where he might be at the moment." He paused. "Are you sure? We would have seen him exit if—alright. I'll call you back." He put the phone away. "He wants us to search this lot and the one across the road."

"You serious?" the weasel asked.

"His family pays my bills," the third man said. "If that means I spend twenty minutes looking for someone who isn't here. I'll do it." The hare stepped away from the car and in Thomas's direction.

Thomas's hopes of getting his hands on his pack vanished, and he hurried to the back of the store.

"Fine!" the weasel called. "I'll take the other side. Mitch, you look at the charging station, then we'll do to the other side of the road and expand the search."

Thomas stopped as he rounded the corner. If the weasel came that way, he couldn't be here. He looked at the dumpster and nixed that idea without even checking for the content. From here, he saw the apartment buildings clearly. And focused on the furthest one.

He forced his chest to tighten, the shiver to—

He barely kept from screaming as he dropped into the snow back, then fought the urge to jump to his feet and get out of the freezing snow. He'd forgotten the line-of-sight thing and the snowbanks between him and the building had had him looking higher. He got up slowly, dusting as much snow off as he could. Only the roof of the convenience store and the top of the charging station were visible, so he was safe from sight.

But he was freezing.

Someone exited the building, and Thomas hurried inside before the door closed fully. The woman looked at him oddly, but kept going. Warm, if getting wet, he considered his next move.

Did he have enough money to pay for another ticket? His father had paid, and Thomas hadn't thought to ask how much it had cost. Did he even want to get on another bus? Richard had to mean Kuno, maybe his father. Could they have people at every bus stop between Minneapolis and Bozeman?

And how had they even known to be waiting for him here?

Thomas reached for his phone, cursing when he didn't have it. Still. He couldn't call his parents to make sure they were okay. He didn't need to panic; he told himself. It might just have been luck they were here.

Bad luck for Thomas, but it didn't have to mean someone had forced his father to tell them about the bus trip. Kuno was methodical, as was Olavo. It would be natural for them to cover all their bases. And Kuno's family had influence in the entire state, his father had said.

Well, if this had been luck, they now knew he'd been on that bus, and while they might not know what his final destination was, they'd know what stop to have people at looking for him. Maybe there was another line he could get on to reach Bozeman, but without a phone, he'd have to find a terminal. The only one he knew was the one he'd escaped, and he didn't think Kuno would have these guys go anywhere soon.

Where would be the next terminal? The driver had said three hours, but there had to be one closer

than that.

Thomas rested his head against the wall.

How many teleports could he do before he was too tired? He didn't feel as tired as he had even after the demonstration, and he'd done two basically back-to-back. He needed the practice if he wanted to use it reliably as a get-out-of-jail card, but if one of them dropped him from exhaustion in the middle of nowhere, he'd been fucked.

"Not to say anything of what'll happen if someone sees me do that."

A passing couple gave him a strange look and Thomas realized he'd said that out loud. He really hoped that was all he'd said that way and that there weren't microphones on the cameras.

Fuck. The cameras. Another thing he'd have to be careful of.

He couldn't stay here. Even if those guys didn't come searching, staying put didn't get him to his grandfather's. He headed for the back of the building and looked out. A parking lot and more apartment buildings. It put him further away from his pursuers, so he exited and kept going until he came to a road, then he followed that in what he thought was roughly east and looked north until he saw the horizon between the buildings.

Could he line up on the horizon itself without seeing the details to use as a reference? Would he be looking too high automatically, or could he will some form of compensation? What were the fucking rules for this power? What if there was something in the way and he—

A door startled him by slamming shut and he screamed as he fell into loose snow. He jumped to his feet and was into higher than his knees. Heart racing, he looked around.

He was in a field, with buildings in the distance in all directions.

"Okay, so long as I don't mind the drop, I can do this." He had hoped the horizon would have put him away from any buildings, but at least he was away from those three men and they couldn't know where he'd gone to, since Thomas didn't know either.

The sun gave him the direction he needed to go. Bozeman was west on the I94. So all he had to do was head in that direction and...

He wasn't even in Montana, not even North Dakota, technically. Even allowing for teleporting when he was certain no one could see him, he was going to be walking for a very long time.

So, due west, where buildings were closer or north, where he would manage a few teleportation practices before... what? Finding out on he was freezing in the middle of nowhere with no reference point and too exhausted for another teleport?

He knew what the hero of a movie would do.

"And where's my crew with the warm coffee and blankets and heater for once the shoot's done?" fuck, he'd be happy with just a trailer to get in.

The city meant access to warmth. Even at night, there would be open stores he could duck into without having to buy anything. It also meant he could buy food since he was already hungry.

"West it is."

He sighed a spot halfway between him the buildings, tightened his chest, forced the—

The drop was only a foot, but the snow was also loose, so he was in it to his knees, but he was much closer. He smiled. And he wasn't particularly tired. Maybe he could do a lot of these and not have any problem. He looked North.

He forced himself to look West again. "Let's not be an idiot after making a good decision. We're almost to the city, and I am fucking hungry."

Ten minutes of trudging through the loose snow had him in a field with packed snow, then on the side of a road with stores on the other side, including restaurants and convenience stores.

This had definitely been the right choice.

Chapter 11

Moorhead, MN, January 13th

This had definitely not been the right choice.

The small commercial lot had been next to a residential area, which had then given way to a larger commercial strip, which had, in turn, become an industrial park. With the sun close to the horizon, Thomas had had to make a decision. Press forward through the industrial park, or go back and look for a place to spend the night.

He'd pressed forward, figuring the park couldn't be too large and that any westward travel he could do today reduced the chances his pursuers had of finding him. He'd looked for a motel or hostel in the next commercial zones.

That had been when the sun was still in the sky.

He'd still been walking through the industrial part when it dropped below and he found out that the reason for the lack of traffic among the buildings wasn't that this was a slow day, as he'd thought, but, as it got even darker and few of the streetlights came on, that the park was abandoned.

Along with the sun going down, so did the temperature, and even changing his brisk walk to a jog did little to keep the cold from seeping through his clothes and fur and into his bones.

The city lights seemed equidistant ahead and behind him, so either could give him warmth, so the question was did he push ahead and hope those lights include stores he could go in for warmth, and maybe a cheap motel, or did he go back where he knew there were stores like that because he walked by them, even if there was a slim chance his pursuers might think to check that area?

He guessed it would be an hour either way. So take a chance, or go with what was a sure bet, with potential risks.

There were always those abandoned buildings, he thought, turning around to go the way he came. But he'd had enough of the cold, and he wanted something to eat.

* * * * *

Moorhead, MN, January 13th

He stepped through the rare working street light and noticed a second shadow stretching. He clamped down on his fear to avoid ending up somewhere else along the road. It couldn't be his pursuers. It didn't matter how rich the guy at the frat was. They couldn't hire so many people they'd be everywhere.

Could they?

The shadow suddenly veered left and Thomas looked over his shoulder, catching the taillights of a car turning in down a side road. He chuckled to himself. Of course, it had been a car. He was walking along a city road, after all. Even in a deserted industrial park, there had been some traffic earlier.

He was relaxing again when the sound of cracking snow reached him and this time he kept from looking over his shoulder. It was just snow snapping under the increasing cold. Snow did that if it was packed hard enough. And it was just a coincidence it sounded like someone walking behind and to the side of him.

He looked ahead, trying to make out details he could use. Why hadn't he just kept on teleporting north? They couldn't have anyone in Canada yet looking for him, right?

He thought he had enough details in the flickering street light at the edge of what he could make out, and was trying to decide if he should risk a teleport when a car turned onto the road, blinding him in the process.

Cursing, he rubbed the spots out and when he looked ahead again, he thought he made out the form of a pickup approaching. He almost tried to jump without being able to make out anything beyond it anymore, thinking Laurence was who had tracked him down. Then he made out the crack in the still working headlight, the way the front grill was held in place with cords, and that the hood was crooked and he relaxed again.

He didn't care what the armadillo might have to do to get here. He cared too much about his truck to let it ever look like that.

He was still trying to get his heart to slow when he noticed it was slowing, and that the back side was held in place with barbed wire and was scratched to the point it might qualify as art. He was stuck still trying to decide if running or teleporting blind was the best option—could he teleport with his eyes closed—when

the pickup came to a stop and a form barely illuminated by the lights from the instrument panel reached for the passenger side and then the window came down. Grunting came through the opening, timed with the pulses of the window lowering.

Wait, this thing was hand-powered?

Thomas looked at the side again, wondering if he'd see a gas tank attached. Only those kinds of antiques would have hand-cranked windows.

"Hey," the man inside said. Thomas cautiously looked in, staying away. Dark pickup with a stranger in it. Yeah, he wasn't getting too close. Hints of motion accompanied the banging on the ceiling, then a light flickered on as the open palm was about to hit it again. "There, that's better." The kangaroo smiled at him. "Sorry about that. Light's temperamental and doesn't come up without the threat of a spanking, or, tonight, an actual one. Didn't mean to look all spooky in here. I'm guessing you have enough of that out there." He looked ahead and seemed to search the darkness beyond the headlights.

Thomas couldn't make out the cracking snow over the surprisingly soft purr of the engine, but he had no trouble imagining them. Weren't old gas engines supposed to be loud?

The man looked to be his father's age and had on an old jacket that had been patched often over a plaid shirt. When he spoke, his breath fogged.

"Can I drive you anywhere?"

Thomas took a step back, the alarm bells going off in his head so loud it was a good thing this was an abandoned area, otherwise, the inhabitant would call in the police on his location.

Damn it, why couldn't he be in a well-populated area right now?

"I'm good, thanks," Thomas replied, fighting the urge to run. Multiple warnings from his parents as he grew up, television ads during the kid's shows, and countless reports of kids vanishing on dark streets, maybe in the car of someone who looked friendly and offered help, ran in his head.

Had he imagined the cracking of snow this time? Had that been a shadow at the edge of his vision, or someone moving in time with the cracking?

"Under other circumstances, I'd call you smart for what you're doing," the kangaroo said. "But do you really way to stay out there, with whoever's sneaking about in the dark over there?" He nodded to where Thomas had thought he'd seen someone. "It's quite a ways back to working lights. I'll take you there if that's as far as you want me to take you, but you have the look of someone heading further. I can do that too."

Thomas lost the fight and looked in the shadows, trying to make out anything. There was no cracking anymore. No motion, but...

"Where are you heading?"

"Got nowhere I need to be anymore. Made my stop so I'm heading where ever the road goes. Or where you want me to take you."

The warnings rang again, but not loud enough to cover the definite sounds of someone breaking the hard snow as they walk closer to him. He pulled the door open and nearly wrenched his arm out as it jammed partway. The steps picked up speed and Thomas forced himself through the gap rather than fight with it.

The pickup lurched forward as he pulled it closed, then cranked the window shut. Only then did he realize he might have made a mistake in getting in. The man was still a stranger and—he made out the form of someone in the darkness.

Okay, it might still be a bad decision, but it had to be the least bad of those he had. Relaxing slightly, he reached for the seatbelt and found a broken strap.

"Sorry about that," the driver said. "Never got around to fixing it. Can't say I often have passengers." He clicked the dome light off, but it stayed on. "Oh, you have got to be—" His fist had almost reached it that it turned off. And the kangaroo muttered something unflattering.

Thomas thought the light almost flickers back on in response.

Now the only light came from the instrument panel, and instead of electronic readouts, he was looking at needles.

"It's old," the driver said, chuckling, "but with some tender love, a bit of care, and a stern attitude, it keeps on rolling."

"Is this even electric?" Thomas asked. Hadn't gas cars been made illegal back when the threat of climate change had been raised? He didn't even think old-world countries relied on gas anymore.

"It is," the driver said proudly. "Did the conversion myself. I didn't put in a phone slot since on something this old all it'd be good for is charging it, and a remote charger's much more practical."

"You have a phone?" Thomas asked, ears up in excitement.

“Kid,” the kangaroo glanced at him, “I’m not that old.”

Thomas’s ears burned. “No, I mean, can I borrow it?”

“Who do you need to call?” the driver asked in what sounded like a very cautious tone to Thomas.

He still stared to reply, then realized he didn’t have a ready one. Who could he call? His family was the only ones who knew he was on a bus. His father was the only one who knew which one. Thomas didn’t consider his father would have told them, but they could have the information from his phone, which meant they had his phone. Could he risk anyone else in his family? His grandfather? No. They knew he was headed for Bozeman, so they’d know it was where his grandfather lived. Paul? No, everyone in the frat knew he was Thomas’s best friend.

He was sounding like his father’s talk of money allowing people to do anything was truer than Thomas had wanted to believe.

“Hey,” he protested as the driver reached for him, “keep your hands to yourself.”

“Calm down, kid. I’m just turning the seat’s heating on.” The hand moved lower and searched along the front of the seat. “As you can tell, the cab’s heating’s about as effective as pouring water in a sieve when you want a tall glass of refreshment.”

Thomas remained alert until the hand moved away. “You have a heated seat on the passenger side, but never bothered fixing the seatbelt?” Maybe his thing was coming to a sudden stop so Thomas would be knocked unconscious and then—

“Came as a pair,” the driver said. “I practiced with putting the passenger seat one in. That way, I knew mine would work. So, yeah, sorry if you don’t get any heat. Haven’t tested it since that one time after I installed it.”

Oh, that made sense. And the seat was warming up. So at least he wouldn’t freeze.

“You never said who you wanted to call.”

“No one,” Thomas replied, unable to keep the defeat from his voice.

They were silent for a while. “If you feel at your feet,” the kangaroo said, “there’s a thermos with chicken soup in it. It’s supposed to be great to warm body and soul.” He reached behind Thomas’s seat and pulled a wool blanket. “This should help you keep any of the heat the seat will give up.”

Thomas hesitated, then took it.

“Also, the name’s Grant.”

Thomas felt at his feet and found the thermos. He looked at it and the blankets. “This is looking a lot like you expected to have a passenger, Grant.”

The kangaroo shrugged. “So, where am I taking you?”

Thomas thought as he tucked the blanket around him. Grandma Royer was in the Twin Cities, so as much as she’d want to help, there was little she could do. He could go to Victor, he was in—no, Madoc had met him during thanksgiving, and he’d think to have his brother checked on. Someone had even mentioned him and his nephews when they were talking about how they had done this to Thomas. Nerio had been there with his husband, so they were out too. Corina was engaged to one of Madoc’s relatives, so definitely not.

“Bozeman, I guess.” At this point, his grandfather was the closest unless he was willing to return to the Twin Cities.

“You don’t sound particularly sure.”

Thomas shrugged. It seemed at he was stuck making the best of bad situations. Hopefully, this one would turn out as well as Grant seemed to be. He opened the thermos and nearly burned himself before he breathed in the steaming aroma.

Grant tapped the dash and a full-color LCD came on. Thomas stared as it flickered.

“Don’t even think about it,” Grant threatened.

The display became solid, giving a streaming station name, as a woman sang a rapid Spanish beat. Thomas still stared as Grant flipped through sites until a soft orchestral piece played. It wasn’t state-of-the-art, but it still felt utterly out of place among the antique the truck was.

Thomas thought about asking for the singer again, but decided he’d rather stay quiet. The music filled the silence, so he didn’t feel the need to, and if he spoke, he might feel the need to tell Grant his story.

* * * * *

Gackle, ND, January 13th

Thomas jerked away to the sound of metal creaking. He looked around. The light from a Seven-Eleven sign illuminated the kangaroo exiting the pickup.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Thomas mumbled a reply, trying to work out where they were. For all the help the sign was, Grant could have driven him back To Minneapolis."

"Since you're awake, do you want to go in and get properly warm? We can sit awhile and enjoy coffee, or tea, if you prefer."

"Coffee." The idea of coffee was enough to help him wake. He forced the door open as Grant tapped on his phone and the truck shut down. He directed his grandmother's favorite curses at the cold as he pushed the door shut, then he outran Grant to the store.

"Where are we?" he asked once the kangaroo entered.

"A couple of hours west of Fargo. Take a seat. I'll see to the coffees."

Thomas sat at the furthest of three tables from the door, and Grant returned with two cups, along with creamers and sweeteners, and two pastries.

Thomas took hold of the cup and will the heat from it to fill him. He didn't remember falling asleep. He'd put the thermos down once he'd finished the soup and had looked at the passing houses as he enjoyed the music, and here they were.

He bit into the strawberry danish and his stomach rejoiced.

"I didn't want to press while I drove," Grant said. "You looked like you needed time with your thoughts, but I'm curious as to why you feel the need to go to Bozeman when you don't sound particularly eager to go there."

He couldn't tell the truth. Thomas knew that. Even if Grant wasn't a complete stranger, the truth just made Thomas sound insane, and he wasn't giving a demonstration to prove he wasn't. He picked the little he could say that wouldn't have him lying and hoped it would be enough.

"I... got in trouble with some people, and I had to leave Minneapolis in a hurry." He hesitated. "My dad thought that hiding out at my Grandfather's until things quiet down was the best thing to do." If not for it being at his grandfather, saying he was hiding out made him sound like he'd been exposed as a secret agent while infiltrating some evil organization.

He looked up as it registered Grant wasn't speaking. He was holding his cup close to his face and had a contented expression.

"You're not going to ask for details?"

"I don't need to know." The hint of a smile as Grant sipped his coffee made Thomas wonder if it was because of the drink, or... he looked at the door. Could he be in on it? "But even as you told me why, it still doesn't sound like you want to go there."

Thomas pressed his lips together. Where was he going to run to, anyway? Or teleport? It was still night and fucking cold out there.

He took a swallow of the wonderfully hot coffee. "They shouldn't have known I was on that bus. Only my dad knew. If they know where I'm going..."

"If you can't go to your grandfather," Grant said, starting on his chocolate-filled croissant. "Is there anywhere else that would be better?"

Thomas shook his head. "I went through everyone I can think of, and someone from... those people met each of them."

"And that would tell them everything they'd need to know to find you there?"

"Yes..." Thomas hesitated. Would it?

What had come up during thank giving? Niero and Karlos were married. Had Oregon ever come up? Niero was his mom's brother. But had it ever come up that he'd taken Karlos's last name? That wouldn't be on any of his family's phones. In Thomas's phone, they were Uncle N&K. Mom had them as 'bros' and he didn't want to think what Judith had them under on her phone. And it wasn't like they lived in the city, like his grandfather. They were on the outside.

"Yes?" Grant said as Thomas looked at him.

"My uncle and his husband live outside of Eugene. They were at Thanksgiving, but no details came out, and I doubt they would have said anything when they were with..." his ears burned. The inquisitive raise of the eyebrow from Grant only made them hotter. Maybe they could use them to melt the snow all the way to Oregon.

"They left with one of them, but... well, talking wasn't their plan." Better not to say anything about Ettore being his aunt's fiance, or that she'd watch the event. There was only so much a normal person could take. "Even if they search for them. I doubt they'll have an easy time finding them."

The kangaroo turned pensive, then nodded. "Okay, Oregon isn't all that out of my way. I can take you

there.”

Thomas lowered the cup down, narrowing his eyes. “How exactly is Eugene, Oregon, not out of your way?” He searched Grant’s face for any clues. “That’s like the end of the country. The only way to go further West is to get on a boat. I appreciate the help, Grant, but couldn’t your response have been “okay, let me take you to a bus station”?”

Grant’s chuckle surprised Thomas. “I’ll do that if it’s what you want, but that’s not who I am.” He paused and seemed to think. “I’m something of a wandering good Samaritan. Helping people with their problems is what I do.”

“For real?” Thomas asked, his tone dripping with incredulity.

Grant sighed. “Yes, for real.”

The man had to be messing with him. Wandering the country helping people? Who, outside the movies, did that? Then again, who could teleport? And what were his options; take Grant’s help or walk? Have him drop him off at a bus station, the train? And if the kangaroo turned out to be some weirdo biding his time, Thomas still had an easy way out.

“I’m Thomas. I noticed you never asked for my name.”

“I figured you’d offer it when you were ready. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Grant wiped his muzzle and dropped the napkin in his cup. “You ready to get back on the road?”

Thomas wanted to laugh, or maybe cry. What he was ready for was to crawl into his bed to the sound of his family moving about the house. He’d even take his parent’s loud lovemaking over this.

But he couldn’t go back to that.

He stood and took the empty cup and plate. “I am.”

Chapter 12

194, ND, January 14th

Thomas fought against looking at the kangaroo. Grant hadn't even glanced his way once since getting back on the 194, and that proved to be more unnerving than if he kept looking Thomas's way. Sure, he said he didn't need details, but how did someone hear "I got in trouble with some people" and not follow that with 'who, how, why?'. He hadn't even asked about how Thomas had ended up walking at night in an abandoned industrial park.

Thomas would demand to know the details if the positions were reversed. Even if he was happy not to have to figure out what he could and couldn't say so, he wouldn't end up convincing Grant the only place he needed to be driven to was the loony bin. And would a demonstration land him in Area 51? Or whatever the real-life equivalent was.

He wished he was in a movie right now. With that would come the knowledge that in the end, everything would be fine. This was just an adventure of discovery. He'd be a man able to save the world by the time he was done.

At least the music out of the car's system would be something recent and with some pop to it, instead of this boring old instrumental stuff.

"So," Thomas said, needing to hear something that wasn't putting him to sleep, "just how does someone go about becoming a wandering good Samaritan?"

Grant glanced at him and focused back on the road. "I don't know that I can explain it in a way that would make sense to you. Say it's a calling."

"Really? Like you're some sort of priest?" Thomas asked in disbelief, and Grant seemed to find that amusing.

"Your family, back in Minneapolis, you get along with them?" Grant asked.

"They aren't who I'm in trouble with," Thomas replied defensively. Of course, since Thomas had asked a question, he was now fair game in return.

"Didn't think they were. You said it was your dad's idea to go to your grandfather. I don't think you'd be going along with it if they were."

"Okay," Thomas said tentatively.

"So?"

Thomas sighed. Well, so long as he didn't go into details about what his parents got up to, this should be as safe a topic as any.

"I get along as well with them as anyone gets along with their family. My dad's a little overbearing, especially since he's a teacher at UMn, where I'm going. My younger brother hates my guts, my older sister can't stop poking in my business. My mom has a cooking channel online. She started it around the time I came along. Three was too many to only be home part-time."

"What did she do before?"

"She was a journalist."

Grant tilted an ear. "Seem to me that's something she could have kept with even while being him."

"The way she says it, she couldn't just sit at a computer looking for the story. She had to be out there, wrestling it to the ground and shaking it until it gave up the good." He chuckled as he remembered her on her knees, acting out what she'd told him. Then he sighed. "Dad tried to be more involved in raising me, but... nothing bad," he said at the look Grant threw his way. "He wasn't neglecting me or anything. But dad can't not focus intently on what he does, and he only has so much focus to go around. With teaching, and planning Victor and Judith's entire life, there wasn't much left for me. But to be honest. I think the real fear was that he would find the energy to add me to his portfolio and then mom wouldn't be around often enough to distract him and one of us would end up suffocating under the expectations. He had the entirety of the Encyclopedia Britannica lined up for Judith to learn. Or so the story goes."

"Your father sounds like a man who doesn't let others distract him." The pickup slowed enough Thomas glanced at the dash, and from his position, the needles said they were going seventy-five now. It had to be stuck because an old clunker like this couldn't go that fast, let alone how fast they'd have to have been going before Grant slowed.

"Mom knows how to press his buttons if you know what I mean." Thomas realized what he'd implied

and prayed Grant didn't press. They crested the hill and grant drifted into the fast lane to pass the state cruiser parked on the side of the road.

"That sound less like press his button," Grant said, smiling, "and more pull his stick."

Thomas sank into the seat. "Well, because of mom, me and Roland were hover-free until I graduated and started getting ready for university. All of a sudden, it was like he'd discovered we existed, and we were about to ruin our lives if he didn't immediately take control of it. Roland blames me for it since as soon as dad was done establishing how he was going to guide me through my classes, he was taking over his training, telling his coach how things should be done, and adding a few hours every day to his weight and game training. At this point, dad knows more about how to play football than Roland does, I'm sure of it." He chuckled. "I finally got out of the house and moved into a frat, only to forget he works at the university I study at. I'm amazed he hadn't shown up at the frat and demanded to take charge of my study time there."

He chuckled again at the image of his father talking with Henry, then stopped as his father said he'd looked into the frat and that he would find out what was going on. Was that how the frat had gotten their hands on him?

The pickup picked up speed and Thomas looked behind them. The trooper was no longer visible.

"You sure your brother hates you?"

"Oh yeah." Thomas had to think of all the times his brother had walked out of a room the instant Thomas entered it or turned around if he saw him there. And Christmas at Grandpa and having to room together.

What a disaster that had been.

"How old is he?"

"Two years younger than me. He's on his high school's football team and he's made MVP a few times."

"Good for him," Grant said, sounding impressed. "You think he'll go for a football career?"

"Dad definitely thinks—thought so." He sighed as Grant looked at him.

* * * * *

Bozeman, December 24th

"Will you stop being my adviser for five minutes?" Thomas demanded, his breath fogging.

His father looked at him. The light from the grotto's entrance highlighted the surprise on his face. "Thomas, all I did was say that you don't have to worry about your grades. That's me as your father, saying that, not as your—"

"And you don't get how worse that makes it!" All he'd wanted was some quiet away from the men in his family, and Ettore, who his grandfather was evaluating by getting him to instruct Roland on how to properly handle a rifle. But his father had tracked him down to the grotto of his childhood like the homing helicARRIER that he was. It had been nice, at first. Reminiscing about how he'd found Thomas in here after he'd gotten separated.

But Eric Hertz, being who he was, had had to follow that with a comment about Thomas's school work.

Thomas rubbed his face as his father's confusion increased. Screaming didn't help, he knew that. "I spent all of grade school and high school managing fine, Dad. That's twelve years of getting good grades without once needing you to tell me how to do things. Then you were in my face, constantly reminding me I had no ideas what I was going with my life."

"Thomas," his father said, immediately switching into instructor mode. Thomas wasn't sure Eric even realized he did that anytime he was about to 'lay his wisdom' on his son. "College is more demanding than high school. Yes, the classes seem easy since you're just starting, but—"

"They get exponentially harder as you are expected to manage your time as well as retain and apply when your previous classes taught you." Thomas even kept the monotone delivery, which he considered a feat considering his mood right now. "I'm fine with the lessons, Dad. It's the constant hovering over my shoulder and expecting me to be valedictorian."

"Son," his father replied. "Just because Judith and Victor were both valedictorians doesn't mean I—"

"You know what?" Thomas cut him off. "Since you're bringing them into this, there's something I need to know." His father was confused again. He didn't always know how to respond to his 'script' being interrupted. Thomas should give him time to register and refocus, but he wasn't giving him the chance to take hold of the conversation again.

"I know you're treating me and Roland just like you treated Victor and Judith while they grew up."

Eric closed his mouth, and the confusion resolved itself. “Thomas,” he said conciliatory. “If you ever felt that I neglected you who you were growing up I—”

“I was grateful!” Thomas yelled in exasperation. He ground his teeth. He took a deep breath. “Maybe I’m just remembering the good times, but I grew up around you, Dad. I saw how you are. How having to focus on Victor and Judith seemed to be everything to you. Fuck, I think it’s a miracle you managed it, considering how much of a handful they both were. I didn’t expect to be one of them, one of your great kids, Dad. Mom was there for me and Roland.”

Eric was silent, and instead of silently goading him, Thomas turned and focused on breathing. On being ready for whatever his father was about to lay on him.

Only when his father spoke, he didn’t sound like the instructor or the college adviser. He didn’t even sound like the Father, layer on of wisdom. He just sounded like a man.

“It sneaked up on me. Tomorrow was always the day I’d have time to apply myself to you and Roland. Then, as I was helping Judith plan her thesis and Victory with raising the twins, you appeared with a high school diploma in one hand and a college acceptance letter in the other. Tomorrow had just arrived, and it was about to become yesterday.”

Thomas swallowed, unsure he’d wanted that level of honesty from his father. Unsure what he’d wanted from his outburst. He sighed. “I’m not against you pushing me, Dad. Even Paul’s realized I need the occasional nudge to go anywhere. But you’re pushing me when I don’t even know what direction I want to go into. And I’m not saying I want you to pick it for me. But fuck, it would be nice if you gave me the space to at least figure that out, instead of showing me how all the possible directions can be great. I’d like... I’d like the luxury of being allowed to not pick one, if that’s what I decide.”

His father’s sigh was melancholic. “I guess I should be more attentive in supporting whatever decision you make. And until then, you still need the right classes to build toward a Liberal Arts degree should you decide on that.”

Thomas hung his head. Even when he was doing what Thomas was asking, his father found a way to remain far too involved.

“Have you considered Madoc’s offer to build you into the next Mister Universe?”

Thomas rounded on his father. “No. We are not going there. And you know what, if you’re going to grab at the lowest hanging fruit, let me return one to you. Does Roland want to play for the NFL?”

Eric stared at him, shocked. “He loves football.”

“But does that mean he wants that as a career? And you even asked him? Like you said, he loves it, and if it comes down to him going along with *your* ambitions for him or quitting, it’s going to be easy for him to just go along.”

His father flinched but didn’t look away. “It’s not just me. His coach thinks he has what it takes to make it there.”

Thomas shrugged. “He’s a Hertz. He’s going to excel at whatever he puts his mind to. But that doesn’t mean it’s going to be football.”

His father was thoughtful before nodding. “Just remember that you’re a Hertz, too.”

* * * * *

194, ND, January 14th

“Your father sounds like a ‘do things my way’, kind of guy.” There was something in Grant’s tone that made Thomas uneasy.

“No,” he protested. He didn’t think that was what his story had portrayed. In fact, it was about the only time he remembered his father stopping and thinking about what he’d done. He still didn’t know if he’s talked with Roland. He hadn’t wanted to pry after he’d nudged in what he hoped was the right direction. “Well, a bit.” That was the first time, after all. Grant must have picked up something from his tone. “He gets hyper-focused. So he does everything he can think of to make sure you succeed, but it means he forgets he’s making decisions for you.” He almost added that his father always meant well, and while true, it came across as something lame to say. “What about you?” he asked quickly before he lost his nerve.

“What about me?”

“I told you about my family. Only fair you tell me something about yours.”

“I don’t have one,” Grant answered in a flat tone and without looking away from the road.

Oh yeah. There was a story there.

Chapter 13

194, ND, January 14th

“Everyone has a family,” Thomas said. When the kangaroo didn’t react to the statement, he added. “Even people raised by quads in the wild have their packs.”

That caused Grant to glance in his direction. “You read a lot?”

Not as much as I used to,” Thomas replied. “A lot of my time’s been taken with—” he stopped, realizing what the kangaroo had done. “You’re dodging the question.”

“You considered there’s a reason for that?”

“I spilled the beans on my family, so I think it’s only fair you give a little, but if you don’t want to speak about it, you could simply say that, instead of redirecting.”

Grant remained silent for a few seconds, eyes fixed on the road. Then he sighed. “My parents died when I was too young to really remember them.”

Thomas felt his ears burn and wondered if they could get hot enough to melt him away. That was not what he’d expected.

“I remember New Orleans. I had to read up on when the hurricane hit. It was Jezebel.”

Oh great, that he’d made him remember their death was bad enough, but in a hurricane? Thomas vaguely remembered Jezebel as the one which had nearly destroyed the city a second time. No wonder he’d said he didn’t have any. Still, there had to have been some good to come from it.

“So some family out of state took you in?”

Grant stared at him. “What?”

“You don’t have an accent.”

“I do have an accent.” The kangaroo refocused on the road. “Just not the one you’re listening for. We were on vacation in New Orleans. We were from Boston. And,” he added as Thomas felt worse for his preconception. “I was raised in the Midwest.” Grant then added. “Your father sounds like the guy who raised me.”

The way he said that made it sound like it wasn’t a good thing.

“He’s not bad,” Thomas protested weakly.

Grant shrugged. “I guess I was stuck with him long enough to lose more of my East-coast accent. Should have left sooner,” he muttered.

“Sorry,” Thomas whispered.

Grant startled and shook himself. “I’m the one who should apologize. You couldn’t know.” He patted the dash. “I found her, fixed her up, and we’ve been traveling the country ever since.”

“You’ve been living out of your pickup since then?” Thomas asked in disbelief. “How much older than me were you?”

“A little. And I also crash on couches, when they’re willing to let me while I help around the house. What’s your uncle like?”

“Nerio’s a nice guy,” Thomas answered. “He and his husband have a carpentry business.” Thomas realized Grant had redirected the conversation toward him and didn’t care. Fewer chances of him putting his foot in his mouth that way. “I get to see them every few years at one of the holidays.”

“Do you think me driving you there will earn me enough brownie points to merit the couch for a couple of days, or will they need me to help around? I’m pretty decent at carpentry.”

Thomas chuckled. “Oh, I think they’ll offer better than the couch for a lot less than housework.” The tilted ear was enough to make him realize what he’d said, implied, and that he couldn’t just wave it aside. At least, this foot in his mouth embarrassed him, not brought up bad memories for Grant. “My uncles are well, pretty open with sleeping with other guys, other than the two of them agreeing to it and being there at the same time. They’ll enjoy other guys, so if you’re into guys, you can score their bed without much effort, I think.”

“You...” Grant hesitated. “Seem to know a lot about your uncle’s sex life.”

Thomas sighed. “Nerio’s a Royer.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t tell me as much as you think.”

He sighed again. “My mom’s side of the family is quite... frisky, and they aren’t afraid of recounting

their exploits.”

Grant smiled. “So those holidays get...”

“Too damned embarrassing,” Thomas muttered.

“In that case, I’m a little surprised you haven’t been regaling me with stories. A good-looking kid like you has to have quite a few exploits under his belt at this point.”

Thomas stared at the kangaroo, mouth agape, and ears broadcasting enough heat to start up climate change.

* * * * *

Lewiston, MT, January 15th

Thomas watched the city sign pass, the name remaining embedded after it was behind them. When Grant had said they’d stop for the night in the next town, Thomas hadn’t expected that name to be the one.

“Are you sure this is where you want us to stop?” He tried to keep his voice steady. The name meant nothing. “I can take over the driving for a while. I have my license.” He reached for his phone to show him and remembered he didn’t have it.

The kangaroo chuckled. “You have something against the city of Lewiston?”

Thomas wanted to say no. The fact that was Madoc’s last name meant nothing. It was just a coincidence. Grant pulled into a parking lot with half a dozen stores, and three times that in parked vehicles.

“I was serious about taking over the driving,” Thomas said, eyeing the white van parked between a blue sedan and green SUV. Gilbert wasn’t the only one with a white van, he told himself. There were thousands of those, just around Minneapolis, probably.

“I’m going to guess your experience is with cars.” Grant stopped the car in one of the many free spots before the Subway. “Pickups aren’t the same and winter’s not the time to learn.” He took a crumpled bill from a pocket and handed it to Thomas. “Get us something to eat while I drive around for a place to park for the night. I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

Thomas stared at the twenty-dollar bill. What were the odds two adults would hand him physical currency in two days? He opened the door and immediately considered closing it, but he was getting hungry, too. He tightened the jacket and hurried into the restaurant, where it was warm.

Well, Siberia probably felt warm compared to the outside. How could anywhere be this cold?

“Welcome to Subway,” a muscular wolverine around Thomas’s age greeted from behind the counter. “What can I satisfy you with today? We have a two-for-one special on cold cut and all-veggie foot-long.”

“So I get two feet?” Thomas turned to the door, but the pickup was already pulling out of the lot. He’d forgotten to ask what Grant wanted.

“That is what two foot-longs means,” the wolverine replied, still smiling. “Does that mean you’ll want two foot-longs?”

“I don’t know if I can swallow two feet,” Thomas answered, looking at the menu on the wall behind the counter. “The longest I’ve had at this point is sixteen inches.”

“Excuse me?” the wolverine said.

“I didn’t even gag,” Thomas added. The clerk’s surprise and confusion only now registering. “How much do you have to offer?”

Oh, dear God. What had he just said? There was no way he could have told a stranger that. He wasn’t like his parents. And to hit on him like that? He wasn’t that needy, was he? It had only been what... three days since the frat?

The wolverine looked around furtively, and Thomas found himself mimicking him and confirming that they were as alone as when he’d entered. Would other customers have kept him from staying that? Thinking back on the few similar experiences he’d had, he concluded the only chance would be if they were women.

“Not that I’m into guys,” the clerk said, in a casual tone, “but nothing near that.” He leaned forward. “You are joking about that, right?”

“No,” Thomas said, a mix of indignation at having his word suspected and amazement at how not bothered the wolverine was. “Sixteen-inch, right down the gullet.”

The clerk looked at the cabinets holding unbaked bread. “I wonder if I can make one that long that’ll fit in the oven? Because now that you’ve said it, I kind of want to see it.”

Thomas laughed, his uneasiness vanishing. “My ride’s going to be back before it’s ready, and I can’t stick around for it. But I will have two cold-cut foot-longs, regular bread. And no, I’m not deep-throating one

of those. Twelve-inch isn't much of an exploit anymore."

The wolverine stared for a second before turning to get the bread out of the tray. "Just where are you from? I've never caught a glimpse of a guy that big in gym class."

"Me neither. He's an international student in my frat."

"He from Australia?" the clerk asked. "You know," he added as Thomas tried to work out what he meant. "Because everything's big down under?"

Thomas imagined Chima as an Australian, or any of the other guys in the frat. "Now you just made me wish there was someone from Australia in my frat." Instead of blushing, he grinned as the wolverine laughed.

Thomas had the clerk add vegetables, then paid and left with them.

He felt good. He'd never spoken this freely before and not ended up as a puddle of embarrassment. Maybe the road trip was doing him some good. If he could get through a dozen conversations like this, maybe he'd start over-sharing with his family, too. Of course, it remained to be seen if he could be this free with a girl around. Only then could he know if he'd be able to do this with his mother and sister in the room.

The cold hit him with a hammer and he looked for Grant's pickup. The ten minutes had to be up at this point. His gaze was drawn to the white van, and he wondered where the owner had gone to. None of the stores here lent themselves to long stays. Maybe it was abandoned? If he checked, it would be on blocks.

He'd taken a step in that direction for something to do while he waited as the side door slid open. "I told you, this is where we parked." A monkey bundled in a heavy jacket exited. Too much of him was covered, Thomas couldn't recognize him. Even the accent and the dark brown face fur with the pale cream around it couldn't be enough to explain the certainty he felt as to who that was. "Arguing with me for twenty minutes about moving doesn't change what I saw. It just means we aren't eating any sooner. Get dressed. Even I need to eat something that doesn't come out of a cock."

How? How was Limbani here, glaring inside a van that couldn't be Gilbert's.

"No," Thomas whispered, as the van shook and he saw a form within it move. "There is no fucking way." He made out voices, indistinct, but definitely more than one. "They can't be here."

Chapter 14

Lewiston, MT, January 15th

Thomas ran, cursing having to do it in such dry cold.

He had no idea where he was going, other than as far as he could manage from them. How the fuck had they found him when even he had no idea where in this state he was? Even if he believe in Limbani's constant talk of knowing stuff, and considering his own teleporting, it was getting harder and harder to. By the monkey's admission, he saw when and who he was going to fuck.

What had the monkey said as he'd exited the—

The screeching of tires made him look over his shoulder as Gilbert's van rounded the corner. The monkey was in the passenger seat, excitedly pointing at Thomas.

No-no-no. He glanced far in the alley he was passing. He wasn't letting them catch him. He focused, tightened his chest, shivered—

He slammed into a wall.

Right. He pushed through the pain and away from it. Momentum. He ran again. Instead of screeching, he heard a door slammed shut. Good. On foot, he had the advantage. That he knew from how he'd escaped them over and over on the way to his parents.

He stopped as he exited the alley, found the furthest flat spot free from snow. Willed himself there, and was running again. He smiled. Like the one before, he was barely more out of breath than the running was causing. And he was sure this time, he'd barely had to cause the physical reaction to trigger it.

Practice made better.

The van rounded the corner ahead of him. Come on. Couldn't they all have picked up the chase on foot? Why did Gilbert—he nearly tripped when he made out a rat behind the wheel instead of the armadillo. What had happened to Gilbert for him to let Madoc drive his van?

Focus. Escape, worry about what happened to one of your frat brother when they aren't trying to kidnap you anymore. He looked around for another—

The impact sent him to the side, and Thomas barely stayed on his feet as the capybara pulled him against his chest and held him there. "It's okay, Thomas. You're safe now."

Thomas tried to push against Olavo, the couldn't get the leverage. "Let go of me." He couldn't even turn his head.

He tried to will himself out of the capybara's arms, but even as scared as he was, nothing was happening.

Olavo shushed him. "We're here to help, Thomas. Madoc's elder sent us."

"Let me see," he snarled, trying to figure what an elder had to do with this or why he'd even cared about him.

Olavo whispered something that sounded like a lullaby, but in his native language. The idea his friend was treating him like a child infuriated Thomas, but didn't give him the strength he needed to push away. Wiggling force them to step around, and Thomas realized his leg was now behind Olavo's. He planted his other foot and pushed.

Olavo let out a yell of surprise as he lost his footing, but didn't let go of Thomas until he hit the sidewalk and had the breath knocked out of him. Thomas manage to turn his head, see something that wasn't Olavo and will himself there.

He was on his feet on the other side of the street, then running again. He teleported a series of time to add as much distance as he could, and in random direction.

He was utterly lost, but he would love to see them catch up to him now.

* * * * *

Lewiston, MT, January 15

Thomas leaned against the dumpster, panting. Another lesson learned. One teleport might not take much out of him, but when he chained them, he eventually felt them. He should have counted how many had gotten him to this state, but he'd been too busy evading the monkey every fucking time Thomas thought he was safe.

How was he doing it? Clearly, he could see more than just the sex he was destined to have.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Thomas said as a vehicle came to a screeching stop at the far end of the alley. He peeked around the dumpster and Madoc exited the passenger side. Olavo was behind the wheel.

Where the fuck was Gilbert? Thomas was getting worried now. The Armadillo never let anyone drive his van. He and Laurence had gotten in shouting matches over it more than once. So it was Olavo, Limbani, Madoc, Gilbert had to be in there.

Was that all of them?

"We just want to talk, Thomas," Madoc called.

He looked at the other end of the alley, he could see all the way to the other side of the street. There he's have a lot of possibility. Maybe he could even see the Subway and meet up with Grant again. If the kangaroo was even there. Would he think Thomas had just run off and continue on his way?

He panted as he tried to focus.

What would happen, if he exhausted himself completely teleporting? Fall unconscious for them to pick up? Not reappear? He peeked again and the rat hadn't moved from in front of the van and Limbani had joined him. Olavo had his arms crossed over the van's dash in what Thomas thought was meant to show he wouldn't gun it toward him.

They seemed to mean it. And Thomas needed the time to catch his breath. It would be nice to know why they wouldn't leave him alone. He stepped into sight. "Then talk." Behind them, on the other side of that street was a three story building with what had to be the stairwell entrance visible. If this turned bad, he was teleporting there. He'd kept his teleportations to the ground during the chase. There was no way even Limbani would think to look for him up there.

"You don't need to run anymore, Thomas," Madoc said. "No one's mad. Raphael just needs you to explain yourself. He's a reasonable man, I'm sure he'll understand."

"Who the fuck is Raphael?" first an elder, now this Raphael? Where they from some alternate universe? At this point that would almost explain this craziness.

Madoc and Olavo exchanged a look. "He's our elder, Thomas," Madoc said cautiously. "He's the one you ran from."

So it was only one stranger they seemed certain he knew. Was that better? "I don't know any Raphael, and if you tell me he's one of the guys I did, sorry, you know I'm not into old guys." That only seemed to confuse the other rat. "It was Henry, I ran from. You know, because he went psycho on me after you called him to 'help me'?"

This time, when Madoc looked at Limbani, he seemed worried. The monkey shrugged.

"Did..." Madoc hesitated. "Did someone do this to you?" was that hope in his voice?

Thomas touched his neck as he remembered the pricking and then the bat on the other side of the room, Licking Thomas's blood off his fangs.

"I ran before he could do anything, Madoc."

"That's good." The other rat smiled. "Then you really need to come back to Kansas City. Look, Raphael has experts and they'll be able to figure out what's going on with you."

"What? What does Kansas City have to do with anything?"

Madoc stepped forward and Thomas raised a hand in warning and the rat stopped.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Madoc. I have no idea what's going with any of you, but right now. I don't feel safe with you around."

"You tried, Mad," Limbani said, then gave a nod to someone behind Thomas.

Thomas turned to see who it was and cursed himself as soon as he lost sight of his target. He had all the fear in the world and his chest was tight, but all he had in sight was the alley's wall as his vision panned in what felt like slow motion.

As soon as he saw something else, that was where he'd be.

Unfortunately, his vision was taken up by a jacket. He ducked, but it followed. He realized someone was holding, then a hand grabbed his arm. The person behind the jacker cursed in Mandarin. Yating.

"Don't let him get it off his head," Olavo yelled. "He need to see to be able to pull a vanishing act."

"What do you think I'm trying to do," the red panda replied as Thomas reached for the jacket with his free hand. It was batted away with more Mandarin cursing.

"Stop fighting," Madoc yelled, as someone took hold of Thomas' shoulder. Thomas elbowed them as hard as he could and Madoc let out a pained oomph. The hand let go and Thomas pushed forward. With more

cursing Yating fell, pulling the rat with him. As they landed and rolled on the ground, Thomas grabbed the jacket, but his hand was caught before he could pull it off.

“Let go of me!”

“No,” The red panda replied. “This is for your own good, Thomas. You need to go home.”

“Oh, you just wait until Judith finds out about this,” Thomas snarled. “She is never going to let you fuck her again.”

“Who?” Yating asked, and the confusion was enough of a distraction Thomas was able to yank his hand out of the grip. He jumped where ever he was looking. It was going to be better then where he’d had been.

Or not.

Weightlessness registered as Thomas looked at exactly the same thing he had been as the jacket went away. The clouds above him. The wind registered next, then that his body was turning.

This was definitely not an improvement over being in the red panda’s arms. Below him, way too far below him, his frat brothers were frozen in place.

The wind picked up.

No, he was picking up speed.

What was terminal velocity? Fuck, he needed a landing spot before his momentum splattered him on appearing. He saw a large snowbank at the back of a parking lot and aimed for just above it. Oh, he really hoped it was all loose snow.

Snow exploded around him the way the ground in Riverside park had when Gilbert had set off one of his fireworks to show Thomas what Texans called fireworks. It didn’t matter how loose the snow was, Thomas groaned. He felt like that firework had exploded under him.

He forced himself to his feet, then groaned again as Limbani, Madoc and Yating ran in his direction. Why hadn’t he looked for a snowbank further away?

“That was impressive,” Gilbert said, approaching casual. “I think Limbani called where you’d end up withing three feet.”

Thomas looked in the distance, there was a wall and that was all he needed to determine where he’d land. He could deal with what he’d fall on once he was there. He squinted at it and when wanting to be there didn’t produce anything, he tried to tighten his chest, to summon fear. But he was too tired for the one, and trying the other only caused him more pain.

“That’s not going to happen.” Felix grabbed Thomas by the arm and pulled him to his feet. “Lim saw me do this.” Something was around Thomas’s wrist, and zipped tight before he could react. “And as annoying as he gets about it, if he sees something, it happens.”

Brake screeched, and Thomas looked up. The way his day was going, he expected the white van to skid to a halt next to him and then be thrown in the back. Instead, an old, beaten-up, pickup in primer gray saw at the entrance of the parking lot, Grant stepping out and reaching for the edge of the tarp secured over the bed of the truck.

“Let go of him,” he ordered, undoing the corner.

“Man,” Felix said in exasperation. “Go home. I really don’t want to have to deal with you.” He looked at the monkey. “How come you didn’t say anything about some bystander showing up?”

Limbani was staring at the kangaroo in confusion.

Grant reached under the tarp. “Can’t do that. I’m not that heartless. So I’m going to tell you kids this once. Go back to your families. If you didn’t hear it, that’s with a capital ‘F’. As in, I have a good idea who you represent.”

“You’re not getting my cousin!” Madoc yelled. “I don’t care what you want him. He’s family.”

* * * * *

Minneapolis, November 27th

“A Lewiston?” the older rat exclaimed angrily.

Thomas looked from his grandmother, who stood partway down the stairs, then to his aunt Carina, who had just finished introducing her fiancée to him, Ettore Lewiston. Thomas couldn’t remember ever seeing her this angry.

“Ettore,” Carina said with an annoyed sigh, “this is Luisa, Nadia’s mother. Luisa this is—”

“Oh, I heard.” Luisa glowered at them.

“I’m sorry,” Ettore said, letting out a nervous chuckled. “Have we met?” the Man was good looking.

Nearly six feet, with mottled brown and gray fur. The overcoat he'd just taken off revealed an expensive dark blue pinstriped suit that didn't hide the muscles on his lean body.

"Your family kidnapped my sister," Luisa snapped.

"I'm sorry?" Ettore asked, the tone making it clear that had been nowhere close to whatever he'd expected to have caused her ire. "My family did what?"

"You heard me," she said through gritted teeth and took a step down, and even though there was ample distance between them, Ettore took a step back. "Adelle went out with a Lewiston and she was never heard of."

He raised his hands. "I'm sorry that happened, but why do you think my family did it? We don't do that, not even now. And there has to be plenty of rat families out there with Lewiston as a surname." He looked to Corina, but she too didn't look sure why Luisa thought what she did. Then Thomas realized Ettore was looking at him, and he shrugged. For as much over sharing of stories as the Royer women were known to do, his grandmother's sister had never come up in any of hers.

"If you want," Ettore said, his tone gentle, "Maybe I can help you find out what happened to her? I have a few cousins and nephews involved in security work, they could find out. Her name is Adelle Royer?"

"Fontata," Luisa replied, some of her anger thawing. "Adelle Fontana, I'm a Royer through Marriage."

"Wait," Madoc said, stepping around Ettore as he took his phone out, "are you talking about Grandma Adelle?"

"So it was your family," Luisa said, anger frosting over again.

"You know who she means?" Ettore asked.

"Grandma Adelle's maiden name was Fontana, but I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention," Thomas's frat brother indicated the closet. "Why are you angry she married Jurrien?"

"She was forced into it!"

Madoc hesitated. "No, I mean, she probably isn't your sister then. Grandma Adelle and Grandpa Jurrien were in Love. I mean Capital 'L' love. No one in the family could believe Grandpa stayed with her after the first four sons." It raised a hand. "It's a family thing. My grandpa wasn't what you'd call faithful. But then again, I don't think he'd ever met anyone who could leave him panting on the bed asking for a breather between fucks until Grandma."

"That's a lot of details about your grand parents' sex life," Thomas commented.

Madoc snorted. "Are you kidding? Grandma Adelle loved telling stories of what she got up with with Grandpa, or the guys before and while they were together."

"That does it, Mom," Neiro said, leaning against the doorway leading to the kitchen. "She was a Royer alright."

"Then why didn't she come with you?" Luisa asked, confusion slipping through the anger. "You through her last name was Royer, so Corina told you who you were visiting, if she was allowed, she would have come to see her family."

"She's dead," Madoc said softly. "She and Grandpa died in a car accident twelve years ago. As to why she never contacted you or your family, I don't know. I remember a handful of stories she had about her sisters, and they sounded like she cared about them. I.." he hesitated. "No one would have kept her from visiting, if she had wanted to."

"You're sure, she was with him because of love?" Luisa asked, and that seemed to make her hopeful.

"Well, that or the size of his cock. Grandpa was among the bigger—"

"Madoc!" Thomas exclaimed. "Don't talk about your grandfather's cock in front of my grandmother."

The other rat smirked at him. "Why, worried she's going to want to experience Lewiston cock the way you have, Cousin?"

"Madoc," Ettore said in a reproachful tone as Thomas's ears burned from being outed had having had sex with him. "That wasn't appropriate. You don't even know if Luisa likes having sex with a kid like you."

Thomas stared at Madoc's some-times removed uncle as his grandmother chuckled. He'd been wrong earlier. This was going to be the most uncomfortable thanksgiving of the decade.

Chapter 15

Lewiston, MT, January 15th

“Come on,” Thomas protested, “we’re barely cousins, and we didn’t know that until—” He cried out in pain as Felix twisted his arm against his back. That had better be a large caliber Grant was about to pull from under the tarp. Because his frat brothers were pushing the limit of what he was willing to let slide.

“Madoc,” Felix ordered. “Go kick the roo’s ass before he does something that’s going to delay us.”

Grant pulled the item he’d reached for at the rat stepped in his direction and everyone, including Thomas stared.

Instead of a shotgun, or a rifle, the kangaroo held a piece of wood. From where Thomas stood, it looked weathered, and broken in places, with—was that twine—holing pieces in place.

Thomas broke from the surprised and focused on the spot next to Grant. Nothing happened and he cursed mentally. He wasn’t that tired. And he’d lose consciousness on arriving, so next to the kangaroo, where he could protect him. He tightened his chest, ignoring the pain. He needed the shiv—

Thomas slipped on the ice as he dropped next to Grant, barely pulling his arm before him before landing on his back. “Fuck,” he groaned. Great, he was about to lose consciousness. Everything was turning dark.

“I’m glad you pulled that off, Thomas,” Grant said, barely glancing in his direction, “now, you need to get in the truck.”

Having to focus on the kangaroo made Thomas realize the darkness was because the clouds were growing dark quickly. He reached up, and Grant pulled him to his feet as the wind whipped about. Holding onto the truck to keep from slipping again, he noticed the white van parked further down the road and the capybara who’d just exited it and was heading in their direction.

“He’s with them,” Thomas pointed.

As if that was the signal the others waited for, Madoc, Limbani, Yating, Gilbert and Felix ran at them. Grant raised his—what was that thing—in their direction and the wind moved hard enough Thomas was pushed against the pickup. It hit the other, knocking them off their feet. Except for Yating, who staggered a step, then was coming at them again as if the wind wasn’t there.

“Thomas, in the truck.”

Thomas stepped around the kangaroo, the wind pushing them together. He raised the... what Thomas had thought was one broken piece of wood was actually many. Nailed together and held in place with varying twine. Thomas staggered, and Grant moved the collection of wood away from him and the wind lost intensity.

“Don’t do this,” Grant told the red panda who was now standing on the other side of the pickup. The kangaroo realigned the... staff, Thomas decided, based on how Grant held it, and the wind picked up.

Yating reached forward for the staff. And Thomas wondered what he was trying to do. Even if he was immune to the wind, there was a pickup between—the panda stepped through the pickup’s bed.

“Don’t!” Grant yelled and the wind increases.

Thomas stared. How could Yating be in the bed of the truck? The tarp wasn’t even pushed down where—fuck, Yating’s hand was nearly closing on the staff, Thomas had—

There was a flash of...something, and a sound like a folded leather belt snapping together and Yating was sliding on his back, pushing snow until it stopped him. He wasn’t moving.

With a curse, Grant shifted his focus to Olavo, who threw himself down as the barrage of wind sent a wall of snow in his direction. Grant looked up, pointed at the clouds, then down, and a lightning bolt struck the truck.

“Okay,” Grant said, panting. “That should—”

The van exploded.

Thomas stared. Had there been fireworks in the van? Even if there weren’t any right now, there was always something with gunpowder in it there. It was something of a joke that after fucking in Gilbert’s truck, you couldn’t stand near an open flame or you’d ignite all the gunpowder in your fur.

“In the truck!” Grant ordered, his voice shaking. Thomas rushed in, over the driver’s seats and as he settled in the passenger side the staff went between the seats and Thomas pushed away from it, worried what it

might do within the cab's confines.

They drove off, then Grant grabbed the wool blanket and threw it over the staff. Staring at it, Thomas noticed some of the wood looked like siding from a house, while other could have been a part of a fence post.

Looking behind them, Thomas watched as Yating staggered to his feet. He hoped there hadn't been another brother in the Gilbert's truck.

"I—"

"Don't," Grand cut him off. "I wasn't going to let them take you, even if it turns out I'm wrong about you."

"Wrong?" Thomas asked. Then again, louder. "Wrong? You don't know me, how..." Fuck, He looked around, he needed someplace he could land and not kill himself from the momentum the pickup was giving him.

"I was going to let you give me the details of what you're mixed in in your own time." Grant was looking in the rear view mirror. Thomas looked over the seat. His frat brother were together, watching them. "I can't afford to wait anymore. If I'm going to keep you safe, I need to know what's going on." Thomas opened his mouth to protest, but the look Grant gave him silenced him. "Everything, Thomas."

Thomas studied the kangaroo, the comment about having been wrong about Thomas still not sitting well, but he'd just said he would protect him, so Thomas had to believe that for the moment, he was safe. And this gave him time to rest. So if he needed to, the next time Grant slowed, Thomas would be able to leave.

So he told him what he'd told his parents.

* * * * *

Highway 87, MT, January 15

"A Vampire? Grant asked in disbelief.

"He tried to bite my neck. That's a vampire, right?" he considered. "Are those a thing?" it wasn't like Thomas was certain what could and couldn't be real anymore. Limbani knew stuff, Yating had stepped through a metal truck."

"Not the way they're depicted in movies. They aren't undead, for one thing. It's complicated," he added to Thomas's tilted ear.

Thomas yawned. He'd gone into more details than he'd had with his parents. Grant had insisted on detailed description of the sex Thomas had been the quizzing about Thomas's feelings and impression right after he was done being fucked, or fucking had left him with ears burning to hot he figured he'd illuminate the darkness from now on.

"Alright," Grant said after driving in silence for a few minutes. "You're definitely Society."

"And that means what exactly?"

"Families of sex mages," Grant replied, casually.

"You're kidding right? There's now way that... you know what, never mind. That explains the sex-crazy frat. But just guys?":

"Women fall under the purview of a different god." Again, the answer was in a casual tone, as if it was a normal thing to say.

"Gods?" Thomas wondered if he could pound his temples until the world made sense again.

Grant sighed, but didn't immediately elaborate. "Short version. Magic comes through gods, so anyone doing magic has a contract with one of them. Worship generates energy, which powers them and abilities, like that red panda used."

Thomas rubbed his temple. Was that supposed to make any sense? "That can't be what I am."

"Normal guys don't teleport, hence, you're magic."

"But that just started one day."

"Stories out that your faction—"

"Can we not lump me in with them?" Thomas demanded. "Even before things turned impossible, I was just the outside they allowed in. And now, they're hunting me. That's not exactly inclusive behavior."

Grant opened his muzzle, closed it and let out a breath. "That faction. From what I know of them, have ceremonies that they need to go through before they'll come into their power. What you described happening in the basement, with the altar and the mask. That has a definitely sense of a ceremony."

"But that was just a hazing," Thomas protested. "I'm pretty sure Felix if who insisted on it, hoping it would scare me off."

His shivered at the memory of Chima over him, moving inside him. Looking into those bottomless

eyes sockets.

“Thomas?”

He shook the memory away and did his best to ignore his hardon. “Look, that other time, I’m the one who put the mask on Chima’s head once in was on the stone.”

“Why?” Grant asked.

“Why what?”

“Why did the two of you do it on the altar? Why did you put the mask on his head?”

“I don’t know.” Thomas tried to remember what had been going through his head, but most of it had been euphoria of all the sex, topping all the guys at the frat for the first time. He remembered keeping Chima for last, but not why. He remembered him, standing by the door to the basement.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, MN. December 10th

He waited for Thomas next to the basement’s door. The naked Adonis, standing proud, hard, eager. Thomas smiled. There were be no hunting needed, unlike with the twelve others who he’d had that stalked over the university grounds and frat house. Chima knew what came, what was owed. And he was there.

When Thomas approached, the hyena moved down the stairs. Not running, moving to the proper place for this. They would close the circle where they had opened it. Thomas would claim him, where He had claimed Thomas.

Thomas’s eyes stayed on that perfect, muscular, ass. Perfect as Chima was perfect His embodiment in every way. He was male. He was potent, and he would be Thomas’s.

The room was dark when they entered it. Darker than he remembered, but the block of stone was visible in the center of the room. The altar where Thomas had willingly given himself over to Him,, and where he would now claim Him.

Chima lay back across the stone block and Thomas stood between his legs, lifting them over his shoulders. He paused, studying the large balls, thick, hard and long cock. Something was ... not right. He looked higher, those abs were perfect, those pecks, deltoids. Nothing should every change about them. The face, those eyes...

Thomas searched around the dark room.

By the door, seemingly floating in the darkness, it waited for him. Mask in hand, he returned and put it over Chima’s head. Chima’s gray eyes looked at him through the eyes holes as Thomas took position between his legs.

Now, everything was as it should be.

Thomas pushed his cock into the hyena’s ass and groaned as it grinded him. Chima’s head fell back. The hyena’s silence didn’t mask the pleasure he felt. The air vibrated from it around them, through them. He had been waiting for this moment, for Thomas to come and claim him. And Thomas would perform for Him; show Him that Thomas deserved to own him.

He thrust in and out, slow and fast, gentle and rough. He watched the perfect body tense and tremble with his thrusts. The thick, perfect cock bounce and leak; the heavy balls tighten. Thomas drove Him to ecstasy just as he pushed himself closer to it. They were one, the same. the same vitality, shared and owned.

The hyena raised his head, and in the low light, all Thomas saw was the empty eye sockets. The mouth moved, sharp predator’s teeth, long incisor, but no words came.

The approval hit Thomas viscerally.

Thomas had given himself over to Him when offered the chance, and now, He was giving Himself over to Thomas, if he wanted him.

He did.

Thomas raised his head as his orgasm hit and let out a silent scream that resonated through both of them.

And then, Thomas crumbled on top of Chima.

* * * * *

Highway 87, MT. January 15th.

“Because it felt right.”

Chapter 16

Highway 87, MT. January 15th.

“Felt right,” Grant said, sounding thoughtful, but in the dash’s light, Thomas saw the kangaroo smile.

“He’s bigger than life, okay. Just look him up on Wild Frats dot Com. You’ll see what I mean.” Thomas closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. “But there’s another reason I can’t be part of that thing. You said it’s based on families and my dad doesn’t have any power and my brother’s straight.”

“Victor?”

“No, Roland. My younger brother. I know Victor’s been with guys, so he’s bi. And Judith—”

“Wait.” Grant raised his hand. For the first time since he started asking questions, he sounded uncertain. “Are you sure she’s your biological sister?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe you’re adopted?”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “No. They’re my family. Whatever’s going on, I’m clearly not part of this Society.”

“Except that you show all the signs based on what you told me. Extremely high sex drive with the ability to do it with barely any rest in between.”

“No rest,” Thomas said, remembering some of the nights with the guys at the frat. Then he realized what he said and groaned.

“That’s definitely Society,” Grant said with a chuckle. “There are magic ways to make that happen, but with them it’s innate.” He considered something. “How active is your father?”

Thomas snorted. “He can keep up with my mom, and that’s quite the feat.”

“You’re mother’s Nadia, right?”

“Yeah. If you want where I get my sex drive from, it’s from her side of—” Thomas winced as he remembered something.

“What?”

“Neiro, that’s who we’re heading to. He’s my mother’s brother, told Ettore and Madoc that he felt it was impossible to have as much sex as both claimed to have.” On the trail of that, another memory came to him, standing out by how out of place it felt around what was going on at the time. “And after the grease fire, while everyone was freaking out about what I’d done and how it was their fault, Madoc talked about my brothers and nephews as if they might be involved.”

Grant nodded, which Thomas felt was a pretty mild reaction to him basically saying he was right. Then he was pulling over to the side of the road. Before Thomas could ask what he was doing, the truck has stopped, and the kangaroo was checking his phone.

“We missed them,” he said to himself, scrolling through a list.

“Who?”

“With what you said, I’m not sure your uncle’s the best place to take you, but the person I need to talk with to be sure stops answering their phone at nine. But they should know how important this is.” He tapped an entry and placed the phone to his ear. The back of it was cracked, scratched, and patched with tape and what looked like glue and something that reflected the dash’s light.

Grant shook his head and put the phone away. “We’re not important enough, I guess.”

“Now what?” Thomas asked, a yawn distorting the question.”

“Now, you sleep.” Grant got the truck back on the road. “Your body needs to rest.”

“You haven’t slept much more than I did.” Another yawn cracked Thomas’s jaw.

Grant chuckled. “I didn’t use my magic to the point of exhaustion after not worshipping for... when was the last time you had sex?”

Thomas considered pointing out that since he couldn’t be part of the Society, that wasn’t a thing for him. Or that if Grant was so worried about it, he could just suck him off. He should unzip his pants and make the offer. With a muzzle like his, he had to be pretty good at it.

He smiled and realized that the gutter was a surprisingly comfortable place for his mind to rest in. Maybe he should spend more time there with thoughts of the kangaroo, his frat brothers, and others from

university having sex with him.

Or, he could simply sleep there.

* * * * *

Stanford, MT, January 16th

Thomas woke with a start and a painful erection, then immediately forgot about it as light lanced his eyes. "Where?" he asked, eyes closed again. When no answer came, he cracked one open, and, blocking the sun with a hand, looked around.

He was alone in the pickup, which was running. Out of the driver's side was the pole for the charging station. This one was one of those large parking lots had at their periphery. Slow charge while customers shopped. Beyond it, he saw two rows of cars and a strip mall.

On the dash, on his side, under where someone had written, 'stay in the truck,' in the frost, were four steaming burritos. His hunger didn't let him question how they were still hot when the pickup barely qualified as warm.

He was eating the third when Grant let in frigid air along with himself. The staff was no longer between them, and in the cleared space he dropped a bag with what looked like fabric around a name he couldn't see the way the bag crumpled.

"How did you sleep?" the kangaroo asked, taking off gloves and blowing into his hands.

Thomas indicated the half-eaten burrito and Grant nodded. He pulled strips of cloth from the bag, then searched his pockets, finally pulling out a needle and bundle of threads he then had to untangle.

Thomas finished the burrito, watching Grant look through the fabric strips. "What are you doing?" He grabbed the last one.

"I'm making you some protection."

Thomas decided to forget the 'rubber works better for protection' comment that popped in his head and settled for and tentative, "okay." As he started eating.

Grant glanced at him, pulling a stripe from the pile and shaking it. "You're safe while you're in the truck, but you can't stay in here all the time, and the instant you step outside, they'll know where to find you." He focused on threading the eye of the needed with a dark thread. "The fact they aren't here already confirms I'm going to be finished with this before you need to step outside."

Thomas considered opening the door, just to put that to the test, but thought better of annoying his benefactor. "Or it's because you blew up Gilbert's van."

Grant paused, his expression turning pained.

"I doubt there was anyone in it," Thomas said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. "Even in that van, six is something of a squeeze."

Grant nodded slowly, then started stitching the strip of fabric. "I don't think it's going to take them that long to replace the van. Most folks in the magic communities who aren't at least comfortably wealthy do so by choice. The Society is renowned as much for their wealth as for the quantity of sex they have. As soon as they were able to dust themselves off, they would have called someone about getting them a new van."

"And that's—" Thomas pointed to the fabric Grant was stitching into a loop. "—going to stop them?"

"I'd be more confident in the results if I was working with wood, but I don't—" he paused. "No, actually, for this, fabric's better. The flow embodies the concept I need better than what I'd get from wood, even if I went with still-alive wood and connected to the concept of the forest versus the tree."

Thomas stared. "Flow? Trees?"

Grant pulled scissors from a pocket and cut another strip into smaller ones. He shook one. "Flow."

The rat kept staring as the kangaroo started braiding the smaller strips together. "Care to explain a little better?" he asked when nothing else was forthcoming.

Grant paused and looked thoughtful. "Okay." He was braiding again. "Right now, you're protected by my pickup. The... let's call it a ward for the time being, that I set up draws on the concept of motion to keep scrying from finding anyone inside it. Basically, no matter how hard they try, we're not where they're aiming for, because in concept, we've already moved on to where we'll be next."

"But we aren't moving."

"The concept of motion, not the action of motion." Grant pulled a knot tight with his teeth before continuing. "Don't think too hard about it. It's not that kind of magic. Now, because this is my truck, the concept of ownership lets me carry that ward with me, so I'm still protected when I'm outside, but you're just a passenger, so I can't use that with you. What I'm doing instead is this, which will make it difficult for your

friends to track you.”

“By using the concept of flowing fabrics,” Thomas said, dubious.

“Now you’re getting it,” Grant replied.

Thomas sighed. “Not in the slightest.”

“Anyway, with this one, and while you’re near me, you’ll be protected.”

“Near you?”

Grant nodded. “It’s my magic, and it would take too long to add the concepts needed for it to carry a charge, so it has to remain in range while I power it.”

“If I’m magic too—and I’m not agreeing that I am—shouldn’t I be able to power it too?”

“That’s not how it works. You’d have to use the magic from your faction, and the only ones I know of who could teach you how to do it are the ones I’m making this to ensure they can’t find you.”

“This, you being from a different society, thing is really making this harder than he needs to,” Thomas said in a huff.

Grant burst out laughing and Thomas stared at him, again.

“They’re called factions. The Society is the name of the faction you’re part of. Mine is…” he trailed off, then shook his head. “Different.”

Before Thomas could ask for an explanation to that, Grant was focusing on his work with an intensity that doused his curiosity. Did he want to interrupt him when he did magic?

The store Grant had gotten the supplies from had to be Fabric Anywhere, since it had the same flowing fabric around the name that he could see on the bag. Next to it was a Subway, then an electronic’s store, and another restaurant, with its facade on the side of the building, so he couldn’t see the name, but there was a sombrero on the bay window, so Mexican of some sort. On the other side was a clothing store, and a shoe store, and then—

He hit the door, and his forehead smacked into the window. “Don’t scare me like that!” he was pressed against the window, except he hadn’t moved away from the kangaroo reaching for him. He’d… “why am I still here?” He swallowed and edged away from the kangaroo, who pushed Thomas’s jacket off his shoulder. “I was looking at the mall. I should be there now.”

“I made some alterations to my truck, and I’m sorry for scaring you. I wasn’t trying to do that, but at least I know they work. Teleportation isn’t a concept I’ve thought about until you explained what happened to you.”

Thomas jerked his arm away from Grant as he reached for the handle.

“Wait until I’ve put this on before you run off,” Grant said calmly, but didn’t reach for him again.

Thomas forced himself to remember the kangaroo had helped him when he had no reason to. He had done nothing to give him reasons to doubt his good intentions. But then again, neither had the frat, until they were chasing him around Minneapolis.

“Is that really to protect me? Or is it so I won’t be able to teleport?”

“It’s to protect you.” Grant motioned and after hesitating, Thomas offered him his arm. “And the alterations I made aren’t to hold you prisoner. You mentioned how some of your teleportations happened accidentally, like when you’re startled. I thought it’d be good to keep you from vanishing unexpectedly while we’re traveling. I don’t think sixty miles an hour is safe for you to appear anywhere. Not to say that you might want to take this off when you’re in the truck and the next time they find us, I expect they’ll have contingencies in place to keep me from helping you.”

“It’s kind of tight,” Thomas said.

“You don’t want it slipping off.”

Thomas pulled his jacket up. “How far can I go? You said I needed to stay close.”

“A few hundred feet should be safe,” Grant said after thinking it over. “So the Subway’s fine if you’re still hungry.”

Thomas hurried out the door. “I’m way more interested in their restrooms.”

* * * * *

Stanford, MT, January 16th

“Fuck, it’s cold,” Thomas stammered as he slammed the door shut behind him.

“Welcome to Stanford, Montana,” Grant replied, phone in hand. “Now, be quiet. I waited for you because this is about you, but don’t speak.”

He tapped an entry and placed the phone on the dash. It rang twice, then was answered.

"Yes, Grant," a feminine voice answered.

"Jules, I have Thomas with me. He's a rat from the Society, and—"

"Lewiston," the person said. There was something about the voice that made Thomas unsure it was a woman.

"Yes, that's who's after him. I need—"

"No," the voice interrupted him again. "Thomas Lewiston."

Thomas shook his head.

"His last name is Hertz."

"There is no Hertz family within the Society." The voice didn't leave room for doubt.

"That's..." Grant trailed off and studied Thomas. "That's unexpected, but it's something for later. Right now, he needs a safe place while he gets used to his situation."

"Define safe," the voice said as soon as Grant stopped speaking.

"Where the people after him won't find him."

"No." Again, they spoke without a pause once he was done.

Grant sighed. "Jules, Help me out, here."

"I am," the voice stated. "I need specificity."

Grant shook his head as Thomas opened his mouth. "Okay. I need a place I can take Thomas to so that even if they find him, they won't be able to show up and grab him."

For the first time, the voice did not immediately respond. "The Lewiston family is in a state of detente with Denton Brislow. Any action that can be linked to them in his city will have long-lasting and harsh repercussions for the Lewiston family. Take him to Denver."

"Where in Denver specifically, Jules? Do I take him to Denton?"

"No. Take him to—"

The call cut off.

Thomas stared at the phone. "Did she disconnect?"

"They," Grant corrected distractedly, taking his phone and looking it over. "And no, they didn't disconnect." When Thomas saw the screen, it was dark.

"Did you run out of power?" Thomas asked in a mix of disbelief and amusement.

"I must have." The musing tone killed the amusement, but Grant didn't elaborate, and Thomas thought he remembered the kangaroo mentioning he was broadcast charging in the truck.

"So... Denver?" Thomas asked.

Grant ran a finger over the back and the repairs Thomas suspected were more than that. "Not ideal without having all the information, but Jules said that's where you're going to be safe."

"You can call them again, right? Once your phone is recharged."

"Yes," Grant said in a tone that made Thomas think he wasn't sure recharging it would be simple. "Once I can recharge it."

If that was one of the contingencies his frat brothers were employing, was Denver safe?

Grant pocketed his phone and buckled up. "But I'm going to want to have a look at it first."

Thomas nodded and buckled up too. The kangaroo seemed confident enough that they should go there. "And you'll be able to teach me about this magic stuff there?"

Grant chuckled. "More the generalities of what it means for you to be part of the Society, and I'm not going to wait until we're there since, for you, it starts with getting laid."

Thomas narrowed his eyes. "Not that I'll complain about sex, but is now really the time?"

"For you, it could be a matter of life and death."

Chapter 17

Billings, MT, January 16th

"Is this really needed?" Thomas asked, fidgeting behind the kangaroo. The room beyond the reception was poorly lit, but not so much he couldn't make out the object of his apprehension. The door with the electronic scanner and what lay behind it.

Guys. Naked guys having sex. Strangers he was expected to have sex with.

He shouldn't be this nervous, he told himself. It wasn't like sex with strangers was a new thing for him. But it was been at Sigma Gamma Theta's parties, and then at the college. A good number of them had become friends, even discounting those now hunting him like he was a fugitive from the law.

But it wasn't the same here.

The sex here came with the expectation that he'd never see the guy again. Sure, at college he couldn't be sure he'd see the guy again, but there was the chance they'd cross patch again, that they'd talk and strike up a friendship. This would be sex and then gone, never to see them again. That felt... odd. Having to pay to get in didn't help this feel normal.

"It is," Grant replied, handing him one of the two towels. "Unless you know someone in Billings who can take care of it for you."

"The only guys I know outside Minneapolis are the ones we don't want to meet up with."

"Then it seems like you're low on options." The kangaroo swiped a keycard over the door's scanner and pulled the door opened, motioning for Thomas to precede him in.

Thomas hesitated. On Paul's sixteenth birthday, once their friends had left and his mother was sleeping, the two of them had downloaded a porno that had taking place in a bathhouse like this one. Debauchery was the most polite term for what he'd seen, and four months spent living at the frat hadn't contradicted what took place when a bunch of guys got together.

He forced himself forward, and instead of the ruckus of grunts and moans produced by fucking, soft conversations, locker doors opening and closing, and running should were the sounds that greeted him.

"You're coming in?" He asked when Grant followed him.

"I'm paying, so yeah, I'm planning on enjoying myself too."

"But..." Thomas hesitated and lowered his voice. "It's just guys here, right?"

The name of the establishment was Ride'M Cowboy, and the animated image on the wall next to the outside door hadn't shown the parts that would mark it as obscene, but it had been clear as to what said cowboy was riding. It wasn't a horse, or a woman.

"Yes." The kangaroo pushed Thomas forward, and the short hall opened up into the locker room, on his left were rows of lockers, with benches between them and the showers at the back. What he could see of the showers showed them to be individual stalls with curtains for privacy and that surprised him. Another way the pronos had lied to him.

It had also had the guys going at it on the benches, while here, no one was even looking at the other naked men lewdly.

"I didn't know you were gay," Thomas commented, forcing himself not to eye the naked guys.

"I'm not." Grant passed the card over the sensor of two lockers and opened them.

"But you're into guys?" Thomas asked, trying to reconcile the situation.

"I am." The kangaroo gestured to the door. "Put your thumb on the sensor."

Thomas did so as he realized the assumption he'd fallen victim to even though he knew better. How often had he stood next to Paul as his brand of gayness came up as part of a guy hitting on the golden tiger and he then had to answer interminable questions about being demi-sexual?

"Put your stuff in there," Grant said, then started undressing. He put the shirt in and chuckled. "They expect you to be at least in your underwear."

Thomas shook himself and had his jacket and shirt in when the kangaroo dropped his pants and boxers without even looking at who might be checking him out. The underwear had the same pattern as the shirt and wondered if they'd come as a set before being distracted by the moderately sized cock and balls under them.

"I'm not a quad," Grant said with a chuckle.

Eqars burning, Thomas hurried to get out of his clothes. Grant hadn't even had to look in his direction to know what the rat had been thinking. That made twice in a few minutes and with the same guy Thomas had made an assumption. And again, he'd known better. Sure, he'd never seen a naked kangaroo before, but he'd taken high school biology, and the difference between people and quads had come up, which had included kangaroo.

Grant caught his hand as Thomas grabbed the armband.

Right. Taking that off would make him visible to his frat brother and he didn't think all the guys in the bathhouse would be enough of a distraction. Except Limbani, he would definitely be distracted by doing all the guys in here. But he'd somehow still manage to keep up the chase in the process. Thomas didn't know anyone able to multitask with sex the way monkey could.

Thomas closed the door and lowered his hand holding the towel until his crotch was covered. "So..." he trailed off, ears burning, as he noticed passing guys looking him over. A bear who had to be his grandfather's age smiled at him.

He looked down. "Does this mean we're going to..."

"No," Grant said. "I'll be nearby, but you're on your own. You need to get used to doing this by yourself since there's no telling when you'll be able to go home to your usual bedfellows. Start with a shower, then wander around until someone strikes your fancy. That's the basic of just about every bathhouse out there."

Thomas swallowed, ears still burning. "I don't know if I can... perform while this nervous."

The kangaroo snorted. "Thomas, if you aren't hard by the time you're out of the shower, you'll have proved you're not Society." He grinned. "But even if you aren't. Trust me when I tell you that in a place like this, you can find guys that'll put even your frat mates to shame; in equipment and experience."

Thomas swallowed as he envisioned someone bigger than Chima, or more masterful than Henry."

The kangaroo leaned in and whispered. "Are you hard?"

Thomas reflexively looked down, not that he had to, and nodded.

"I rest my case." Grant chuckled. "Now, go shower and remember that this is about having a good time first. The rest is just a... happy consequence of a happy ending."

Oh sure, Thomas thought as the kangaroo pushed him toward the showers, it was have a happy ending, or just an ending to his life. No pressure. He was quite aware of the other guys in various state of undress as he approached the stalls. Maybe he could stay in there and just jack off? How many times would it take before he could get out and not be rock hard again at the sight of the next naked man? Fuck. He'd known his sex drive had cranked up to porn levels since joining the frat, but maybe Grant was right. It had to be magic for him to be unable to even contemplate getting soft at the moment.

He kept a mental on his nervousness as he felt and imagines eyes on him. He's asked for him to add something like what he'd done to the pickup to the armband, but the kangaroo had gone on to explain about the contradictions in the flow of the fabric and the required rigidity needed to hold someone back. There had been more, but that was the extent of what the rat had retained.

So Grant had finished with telling Thomas he would have to watch himself so he didn't accidentally teleport, utterly missing the contradiction inherent in trying to prevent something that by definition couldn't be planned for.

So Thomas did all he could to remain aware of what happened around him, he guys happening and the grandfatherly bear approaching just as Thomas reached an unoccupied stall.

"Hello, young man." He had a deep, warm voice. "I couldn't help noticing you're nervous. Is this your first time?"

"I've had sex before," Thomas blurted out and barely kept from groaning.

The bear smiled. "That's good. A place like this isn't where you want to learn, and today I'm not in a teaching mood." The bear ran a hand along Thomas's shoulder, then past it to pull the curtain aside. "What I can do, is help you relax."

"Aren't I young?" Thomas looked down, embarrassed at the attention from the older man and comforted by his smell. Next to the tent in his towel, the bear's cock stood at attention. From this angle it looked average in length, but on the thicker side.

The man raised Thomas's head with a finger under his muzzle. "We're all men here. You tell me no, and I'll sadly let you be."

"It's..." Thomas back into the stall, swallowing his surprise. He'd never even considered such a situation, but there was the man, old enough to be his grandfather, offering. "Are we allowed to do that here?" he asked as the bear followed him in, closing the curtain.

"It isn't forbidden, simply considered in bad taste to do it in the open. Too many movies have taught young men that anything goes in a place like this."

Thomas opened his mouth, his face heating up, to explain that he hadn't meant it that way, but the kills happened first. Thomas closed his eyes as the tongue pushes his lips apart. He moaned as it entered his muzzle. A callused hand closing on his hard cock made him realize he'd dropped his town, but he didn't care.

The bear smiled, then broke the kiss. "Eager, I like that. What would you like to do?"

Everything, he mentally screamed, unable to make his mouth work.

The man chuckled. "Can you say artichoke?"

The strangeness of the question derailed his thoughts hard enough he expected to hear the squealing of brakes, followed but the sound of metal slamming into metal. The bear was looking at him expectantly.

"Artichoke?" Thomas said, the uncertainly making it a question.

"Good. That's your safe word. You seem to be at a loss as to what you want, so I'll do things to you. I don't plan on hurting you, but if you need me to stop at any point, just saysay that word.

Thomas nodded, relieved and immediately tensed as the man reached for the armband. "Artichoke. It stays on, okay?" he added at the tilted ear.

"Is it a mark of ownership?" the bear asked, sounding concerned. "I saw that the man you came in with insisted you keep it on."

Thomas shook his head. "It's complicated.... Do you believe in—" a finger on his lips silenced him.

"You used the safe word and explained what you didn't want me to do," the bear said calmly and smiled. "That's what it's for. Oddities are what makes life interesting. Shall I continue?"

Thomas nodded and was pressed against the stall's wall, the older man running his hands along the rat's sides, stomach, chest, neck. Thomas responded by touching the bear, his hand impatiently wrapping around the balls and cock, biting his lower lip as the man played with his nipples.

"Fuck me."

"Are you sure?" the bear asked.

Thomas nodded.

The bear took a condom and a packet of lube from a plastic bowl stuck to the wall, by the stall's entrance. Thomas started to protest, he'd had his immunity shots, but stopped. If the man had taken it, it made him more comfortable to use one and Thomas wasn't going to push him out of his comfort zone. The man handed him the condom, and Thomas dropped ot his knees. He locked th balls, then swallowed the cock to its hilt.

"Oh, dear God," the bear said. "I don't object, but if you want me to fuck you, you're going to have to stop." Thomas looked up, grinning, as he tool the condom out of the package. "That's a talented mouth you have."

Once the cock was wrapped, Thomas stood. He took the packet of lube and slicked it and then his hole, before turning and raising his tail.

"Do you need me to loosen you?"

Thomas shook his head. He couldn't remember the last time one of his frat brothers had had to bother with preparing him before they fucked him. The bear pressed against him and Thomas found himself pressed against the stall wall again, but from the front this time. He felt the finger searching and finding his hole, then something pressed and stretched him

A spike of sensation, that was never the pain he imagined even his first time should have cause, back when Limbani fucking him on that stone block, and the beat was inside.

He hissed in pleasure. "You're surprisingly tight, but not being in discomfort."

Thomas pressed back, suddenly needing the bear to fuck him, to cum inside him. He was hungry as if he hadn't eaten in days.

The bear initially thrust slowly, then picked up speed. Thomas tightened his ass and with a curse, the man tensed. The cock spasmed, and... something was off. Thomas didn't know what, but something was missing. The bear panted in his ear for a second, then pulled out.

Before Thomas thought about it, he dropped to his knees, pulled the condom off and swallowed the cock again. Flavors exploded in his mouth, salty, tangy, wonderful. What had the man eaten for his cum to add such flavors? Not satisfied with the little he tasted, he was sucking him off, trying to coax a second load out.

"You need to stop," the bear said with some urgency, then pulled Thomas to his feet. "I'm afraid that at my age, I need a rest, and I get too sensitive."

"You taste amazing."

The bear smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. Do you need help with your shower?"

"My what?" Thomas looked around, and realized he was in a shower stall.

"It warms my heart to know I have such an effect on a young man. If you won't need my help, I'm going to go sit down."

"Can I fuck you?" Thomas asked in impulse.

The bear tilted an ear. "Do you top? With how quickly you offered your ass, I thought you were a bottom."

"Some things you just need to be fucked." Thomas smiled wistfully. "The first guy I topped has spent the entire semester riding my ass like a workhorse." The smile dripped as he remembered that Limbani was hunting him the very moment.

"That expression is my sign to leave," the bear said. "But how about this? I'm going to head to the bar, and while I can't promise I'll be there when you get out, if I am we can find a bench and you can fuck me on it."

Thomas smiled hungrily. "Okay."

Thomas showered as quickly as he could, then settled for damp fur in his hurry to head to the bar.

The bar turned out to be better lit. A room with a counter on which naked men sat enjoying drinks, along with a few unoccupied tables and booths where the men might be doing more than drinking. The grandfatherly bear wasn't among the men in the bar.

"What can I mix you?" the antelope on the other side of counter as Thomas once he stepped up to it. "Before you ask, nothing's alcoholic, but I can make a virgin version of anything you can think of." He leaned forward as he looked Thomas up and down. "And I'm not on the menu until I get off in three hours."

The dalmatian on the stool next to Thomas snorted.

"Did you see a bear?" Thomas asked. "Old enough to be my grandfather. Brown fur with gray in it."

"Bruce?" the antelope replied. "Yeah, he was here a few minutes ago. Stopped long enough to get the attention of a guy your age. They'll be in a room somewhere."

"Don't waste your time on him," the dalmatian said. He was in his late twenties. "He never fucks the same guy twice."

"Oh," Thomas said, disappointed, and immediately realized how misplaced the reaction was. This was a place where he could find anyone he wanted to fuck. What did it matter if it wasn't one specific guy? The antelope had looked him over, and now so was the dalmatian. "Want to get fucked?"

"As a matter of fact, I would." The man escorted Thomas through a hall, then into a room with half a dozen low beds, only one of which was occupied. A lion slowly riding a tiger.

Thomas pushed the dalmatian onto his back on one, raised his legs over his shoulder and lined up his cock.

"Whoa there, hold your horses." The dalmatian handed Thomas a packet. "There's some prep needed." Thomas opened his mouth to protest it wasn't needed, but noticed it was lube. Ears burning he used it to slick himself and the man's hole.

"Do you need me to loosen you up?" Thomas asked, remembering the bear asking him.

"I'm good with just lube," the dalmatian replied with a smirk. "You aren't my first guy today."

Thomas realigned his cock and slowly pushed in.

"Oh, yeah." The last word stretched into a sigh. "No need to be too gentle. I can take some abuse."

Thomas nodded, barely hearing the comment. This felt right and amazing. Flesh should be against flesh; heat on heat. He didn't know he wasn't cumming right then and there. He bottomed and pulled back, pushing in again before his cock was fully out. He grabbed the guy's cock and stroked it, causing the ass to spasm around his cock.

Had it always felt this good? How was he still not cumming?

He fucked harder, the pleasure increasing. He moaned as the man under him said things, tensed and, just as Thomas finally came, the ass tightened around his cock.

He held himself there as his cock pulsed and whole body vibrated. That was... it was... fuck was there a word? His hand was covered in the dalmatian's cum and he licked it. Fuck did all the guys here eat the same thing for their cum to take this good?

"I am never going to get enough of this," the man said dreamily.

"Really?" Thomas asked, mildly surprised someone outside the frat enjoyed it as much as they did.

"Oh yeah. Cock up my ass, filled with cum." He sighed. "There's no better way to fill an afternoon."

Thomas grinned. "Hold on then," and he was thrusting again.

"You're still hard?" the dalmatian asked in surprise, then his head fell back and he moaned.

Thomas couldn't believe it felt just as amazing as the previous time, all the way to the orgasm, even if he was the only one reach it. The dalmatian's cock was still soft, but the smile on his face said he'd still enjoyed the ride. Once he was able to breath again, Thomas pulled out.

"Man, I miss being young," the man said.

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "You could do this when you were my age?"

"I could never do *that*," the man said with a chuckle, "I've never been one for topping, but my back could take a dozen guys before it needed a rest. Now I'm going to have to stand and walk around for a bit before I lay back on it again."

"If you want another go at it, I'm going to be here all night."

The dalmatian shrugged. "Sure, you never know." Then he was walking out of the room.

There was a dry sauna at the end of the hall that reminded Thomas of Madoc and his room of worship... and that image took on an entirely new meaning now that Grant had told him of gods and how sex was like worshipping for the guy in the frat. Thomas entered and was sitting on a cock the moment the offer was accepted, then he had one in his muzzle. The man under him came and Thomas felt like his sense lit up. That was what had been missing with the bear. The man he was sucking off came, then Thomas had him bend on the bench, fucking him while someone pushed into the rat and fucked him.

Thomas found a communal shower after that which put the one in the movie he and Paul watched to shame with the level of debauchery taking place. He eagerly joined in and fucked, was fucked and sucked off anyone and everyone in his vicinity. He was no cleaner leaving than he'd been entering it, just wetter, which felt appropriate since he then found the wet sauna.

There was the gym room after that, where on top of impressing the guys there with how much he could fuck them. He did the same with how much he could press. And how much he could be fucked while pressing weights.

Thomas slept.

Well, he had to have slept.

And the sex continued during what had to have been sleep. It took on the surreality of dreams, with extra lights that sounded virile and smells and prickled his skin and made his fur stand on end. And silent words that carried emotions.

Or maybe he was high.

No, he it had to have been sleep.

But the one thing Thomas was certain of, was that the sex did not stop.

Chapter 18

190, MT, January 17th

Thomas watched the landscape go by, his mind buzzing with so much he couldn't fix his gaze on anything long enough to take in what he was looking at.

"Well?" Grant asked.

"I'm great!" the rat answered, grinning maniacally. There had been so many guys, so much sex, and there had to have been some sleep, but even if there hadn't been, he was fully awake even after two hours of sitting in the kangaroo's pickup with nothing to do other than watch the scenery pass by.

"So, doing it with strangers isn't something to be afraid of, then?"

"Of course not." Thomas immediately replied. He was going to do strangers all the time now, the more the merrier. He would—

Having to consider the mechanics of arranging groups of guys, since he no longer had the frat to rely on, took down his buzz enough, he could consider what he'd done and how it was leaving him feeling, and he was reaching an unsettling conclusion.

"Did I steal their life force or something?"

Grant stared at him. "Why would you think that?"

"I'm bursting at the seam with energy. I have to have taken that from somewhere, and they were the only ones I was with." Maybe if he considered the number of guys, he probably hadn't taken a lot from each, but he had called Henry a vampire and now he had... yeah, the buzz was definitely gone.

"That's not how it works for you," Grant said. "You don't take, when you have sex, you create." He glanced at Thomas and the rat's expression had to convey his confusion because Grant because thoughtful. "Okay. Keep in mind that each faction is a little different and that my knowledge comes mainly from personal research. For you, sex is an act of worship. Don't overthink it, this is magic. The act creates an energy that powers your god, but you get to keep some of that energy. Because his domain includes vitality, it manifests in you as being energized. It's not the same as a proper night's sleep, so don't think you can just fuck your way through every night, but it is why you're able to have so much sex."

Thomas rubbed his temple. Worship of a god, magic, getting some of that because he'd had sex. It was impossible. It should be impossible. So why did it feel... right? Right, beyond the energy he still felt, even if the buzz was gone.

"Okay. So this god of mine—that feels so weird to say—it wants me to have sex. What else?"

"He. That's one thing the Society is unabashedly clear about. Your god is male." He grinned. "Extremely so, to hear the stories going around. Beyond that, there isn't much I can tell you. Male vitality and potency are his domain and sex between guys is the purest expression of that. Oh, and don't be surprised if you hear them capitalize the 'h' when they refer to him. They can't seem to help it."

The way Grant said vitality and potency made them sound like ingredients in a list, or materials needed to craft something. That made Thomas wonder something. "Have you actually talked with anyone from the society? Other than the parking lot stand-off," he hurried to ask as the kangaroo was opening his mouth with a twinkle in his eyes. "Or me."

He closed his mouth. "I'm not aware of having been with someone from the Society. Considering who slept with, there has to have been at least one—from more than that faction," he mumbled, "but I've yet to hear one scream they're Society as they orgasm."

"So no one screamed something that sounded like a god's name?" Thomas asked. "I mean, I think I should know my god's name, don't you?"

"And we have the first step toward acceptance," Grant said in a tone full of fabricated rejoicing. His smile died away as he thought. "You know, no one I've spoken with ever said what the name of your god was." He frowned. "Actually, I think I remember someone saying something about him not having a name." He shook himself. "It's probably just that the Society is secretive about it. Most factions tend to not proclaim their god's name, using something of a descriptive. For example, Baterilmamir is referred to as The Green Man."

"Maybe it's because no one can pronounce his name," Thomas said, trying to wrap his head around how Grant had said it so casually. "So what does the Society refer to Him as?"

Grant glanced at Thomas.

“What?”

“Nothing. And I don’t know they refer to him as anything. At least no one I’ve been with who was telling me about the Society ever used even a title when referring to their god.”

Thomas tried to think of another question about his god’s name, but if Grant didn’t know, asking more wouldn’t make him suddenly learn it. And his comment about who he’d been with made him curious about something else, so he tried to come up with a way to ask that wasn’t tactless.

“You said, ‘considering who you slept with’, and then mumbled about more than one faction. That makes it sound like there’s been a lot of...” he looked for the right word, “variety.” That could have been a lot smoother. He decided.

“I don’t discriminate,” Grant answered, chuckling. “Just about the only thing I look for is an ability to hold a conversation. Not that once we’re horizontal, I expect talking to happen.”

Thomas looked outside, thankful Grant had stopped there. Anymore more than it would have fallen into Royer level of disclosure and while he’d gotten used to that among the guys in the frat, coming across yet another person who was too free with their sexual talk would have been too much.

“Okay, since you told me about my god—” that still felt weird. “—can you tell me something about yours?”

“I don’t have one,” Grant answered.

“Oh, okay.” Thomas stiffened and looked at the kangaroo as he remembered something. “Didn’t you say that all magic came from gods the other day?” He tapped the armband. “Unless you’re lying to me, this is magic. And that staff sent Yating flying and called down lightning. That was the best special effects I’ve ever seen if it wasn’t magic.”

“To every rule, there is an exception,” Grant recited. He glanced at Thomas. “We, that is the people who use magic the in the way I do, are beyond gods. If we follow anything, it’s more akin to the raw concept of the universe, of the possibilities it represents. It’s why I’m not limited in what I use.”

“Beyond gods?” Thomas asked doubtfully. It was either too much, or the deal he’d rather be on. Thomas wasn’t sure which at the moment.

“Think of it this way. The universe is a spotlight. So everything gets that light, but for just about everyone, it’s too diffused to even notice. Some can notice it and manipulate it.”

“You and me.”

“Not quite. I ‘see’ that light. You are receiving a channeled version... okay, the gods are like a combination of colored filters and magnifying glasses. They focus the light so you can perceive it, but in the process, they tint it, therefore limiting what you’re able to do. Yours color is sex, another is nature, another one information. There are a lot of them, each changing the light a little so their followers can make use of it.”

Grant seemed rather proud of his explanation, and Thomas smiled. “I’m sold. Maybe I should go for that instead.”

“And give up sex?” Grant replied, chuckling.

“What?” Thomas demanded. “You can’t ask me to give up sex. You had sex.”

“Oh, I had sex, but I think what you had qualifies as needing to be capitalized. You get that because of your god. The rest of us have to settle got the normal brand of sex. The once and I need a long breather. You...” Grand smiled. “Had the guys taking bets as to when you’d drop from exhaustion.” He handed Thomas two twenties. “That’s your cut.”

Thomas stared at the physical money. “You’re serious?”

The kangaroo shrugged. “I knew you don’t have to stop.”

“And forty is my cut? Didn’t I do like all the work?”

“I’m not rich, you know. And I never bet everything I have, even on a sure thing.”

Thomas took the bills and considered what Grant had said. What would it be like to have a normal sex drive? And what did that even mean? His mom’s sex drive was nowhere near normal, and his dad kept up, so... Considering how genetics worked, he was bound to have something that would let him go at it a lot, anyway.

“Before you’ve convinced yourself that you can give it up,” Grant said, “you can’t.”

“What do you mean, I can’t? Isn’t it just about learning how to do the stuff you did?”

Grant smiled. “First off, I saw the way your eyes glazed over when I started describing what it is I do. You’re smart, but you lack that spark that lets those like me think the way we do. But,” he continued, keeping Thomas from protesting, that he had whatever that spark was. “I’ve heard stories of people switching gods, but I have never heard of one about someone becoming godless. That’s a story that would be told, trust me on that. I can’t think of one thing someone could do that would make a god willing to let them go.”

Thomas looked outside, a sigh escaping him. "Then, do you know of a faction who'd taken in an undecided freshman who'd only good at sex? And probably wouldn't even be good at that anymore, since it sounds like His the only reason I'm so good at it." He rested his head against the glass and, after a few seconds, felt Grant's gaze on him. "I'm just saying that since the Society is after me for one reason or another, they wouldn't have a reason to bother if I was part of another faction, right?"

Grant didn't immediately reply. "There's quite a few things wrong with your assumptions here, but the big one is that you're mistaking rejecting your god's followers for rejecting him. And let's say that it does work. What's to keep them from chasing you, anyway? Or what if they see what you did as heresy, even if he doesn't care about it?"

Thomas sighed again. "I guess that means we have to keep running." He leaned back in the seat, and quickly the silence became overbearing. "What made you choose the universe?"

There was what could have been a flash of anger there before Grant shook his head, his expression fully neutral.

It had to be linked to his family and how he lost them, Thomas realized. "Should I expect to run into anyone like you in Denver? Or had your wandering good samaritan routing made you drift away from all of them?"

This shake of the head was only accompanied by a tightening of the lips.

Well, that didn't bode well. The silence was now filling with awkwardness. It was already there, so he might as well. "Okay, then I have to ask—"

"Thomas," Grant said plaintively, "stop asking questions. In fact, forget what I said about the universe being spotlights and the filters. Don't mention it to anyone, definitely not someone who follows a god. It's not going to endear you to them."

"Okay... I'm going to make a note of that." Thomas stared at the kangaroo. That was quite the dam to have burst inadvertently. "But what I was going to ask was if I could blow you."

Grant gave him the side-eye. "Kid, I'm driving."

"So? It's not like you're going to have to do anything."

"I'm going to have to keep control of the car," he replied, disbelief in his voice.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, September, 22th

Thomas bobbed his head on the armadillo's cock, massaging the balls with a hand.

"Oh fuck," Laurence said, spreading his legs as much as the foot well let him. "I am so glad I won the toss to help you move your stuff to the frat." The hand held Thomas in place as he thrust a few times, then released him. Outside, he heard the sounds of other cars on the highway.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, November 27th

"Fuck," Thomas groaned as Paul deep throated his cock. He was so glad the traffic was at a standstill because trying to hold the car steady would be impossible right now. When the golden tiger pulled off, Thomas placed a hand on his head and fucked his mouth hard until he came.

* * * * *

(needot find out the town with the shooting range and the timeframe Laurence took him and Felix there for the challenge)

"Okay," the otter said in a dreamy tone as Thomas sucked him off, "You aren't entirely horrible at this."

The rat gave him the finger, which made Felix chuckle but didn't stop or slow the blowjob. He knew they were on back roads by the number of turns, slows, and stops. Thomas could just imagine them stopped at a light and the driver in the next lane noticing his bobbing head.

* * * * *

I90, MT, January 17th

"It's not that hard," Thomas said.

(it probably uses a few more snippets, but I can't think of who had a car in the frat)

Chapter 19

190, MT, January 17th

“It’s not,” Grant repeated, with a disbelieving shake of the head, “that hard.” He chuckled. “It’s got to be a Society ability. And that’s a no thank you. Unlike you, the bathhouse will last me a while.”

Thomas looked out at the snow-covered hills again. The scenery hadn’t become any more entertaining while he looked away. “Can I at least drive for a while?”

Grant stared at him, and the pickup drifted. The kangaroo kept looking at Thomas, stunned, as they approached the highway’s shoulder. Enough, he opened his mouth to snap Grant out of whatever was affecting him, only for the man to burst out laughing and bring the pickup back into the lane.

* * * * *

Kaycee, WY, January 17th

“Why not keep going until Casper?” Thomas asked as the kangaroo pulled into the charging station. “It’s just what, an hour away? And there’s you know, stuff to do why the pickup charges.” He motioned to the emptiness around.

The charging station was the only building on this side of the highway. The other side had what had looked like houses to Thomas and maybe one building large enough to be a store, but nothing that looked like it would keep him entertained.

Grant shook his head. “We charge here and we’ll be able to make Denver tonight. Stopping in Casper isn’t—” he shook his head again, coming to a stop next to a charger. At least it was one of the fast-charging models, so Thomas would only have to deal with boredom for an hour at most.

Grant pulled a crumpled twenty from a pocket. “Get us food for the road. I don’t plan on stopping again once we’re moving.”

“Pit stop?” Thomas asked, taking the bill.

Grant hesitated. “If we have to.”

Something had the kangaroo on edge, and by the number of times he’d pulled his non-functioning phone out to look at it as they drove, that was what. Thomas hadn’t worked up the nerves to ask why his phone breaking down made him nervous.

Thomas grabbed the plastic bin full of trash at his feet and braved the cold long enough to run into the building. The bored-looking marmot barely looked up from where he sat behind the counter as the electronic chime sounded.

Thomas emptied the trash into the larger trash container, then looked through the selection, sticking to prepackaged sandwiches, bags of chips, canned sodas, and a bag of peanut butter cookies.

“Hi,” Thomas said as he placed his purchases on the counter. This close, the marmot looked half asleep. Had Thomas’s arrival woken him? Did a place like this get more than the lone customer in a day?

“Hey,” he replied lethargically. He couldn’t be more than a couple of years older than Thomas. What kind of hell would a place like this be? Thomas didn’t even want to imagine.

“What’s exciting around here?” Thomas asked, to keep the marmot from falling back asleep.

The snort seemed to wake him a little more, and he pushed himself off the stool. “It’s whatever the customers bring. Which means that most of the time it’s just boring me.” He looked over the items without moving them to the scanner. “Fuck, if I’m lucky, it’s only a few hours between them.”

“Hours by your lonesome?” Thomas smiled. “So you can get up to your own fun and there isn’t anyone to stop you?”

He did have something like an hour to kill, and this poor marmot said the customers brought the entertainment. Of course, Thomas couldn’t be sure he’d be interested.

“Like there’s anything fun I can get up to on my own in this dump,” the cashier scoffed, scanning the first of the sandwich.

Thomas leaned forward and gave the marmot his best smile. “But you aren’t alone right now.” Grant had said he needed to get in the habit of having as much sex as he could. The worse that would happen now was the marmot turning him down.

But the confusion as the marmot looked at him wasn't outright refusal.

Thomas licked his lips the way he'd seen his mother do to his father when she'd wanted him to know they were about to have some fun. He hoped it would have the same effect here, and that it wasn't a secret code between them.

"Are you..." the marmot looked around. "Is this?" he shook himself and leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Are you actually offering to blow me?"

"If that's what you want." Thomas gave a casual shrug. "We can get up to more, if you want." That was basically a yes, wasn't it? The marmot wasn't kicking him out, laughing at him, or looking disgusted at the idea. The state of confusion that was back again made Thomas wonder about his intellect, but he figured he could help settle things easily enough.

He walked around the counter; the marmot watching him, but not doing or saying anything to cause Thomas to stop. The cashier took one step back as Thomas entered his personal space, but then stopped and let the rat press against him.

The marmot gasped as Thomas cupped his groin. Yes, the hard cock he felt definitely qualified as a yes. The cashier whimpered as Thomas rubbed it while reaching for the tail strap. That undone, his hand was inside and he raised an eyebrow as he encountered fur instead of underwear, then hard and leaking flesh.

Thomas smiled. Other than the guys at the frat, and their games of making his underwear vanish, this was the first guy he'd encountered going commando.

The moan that escaped the marmot was needy as Thomas squeezed the shaft, and the rat hooked the waistband, intent on tasting what was there. A blowjob had been mentioned so—

Something hit the bay window hard enough Thomas looked around the dazed marmot. It was dark enough the lights had come on and the wind was dragging a trashcan. He looked up. The clouds were even darker. Where had they come from? It had been clear just—

"Fuck."

Thomas was outside before he realized he'd left the marmot there without an apology or an explanation, but the skies didn't turn this dark without help. He ran a hand over his arm and felt the armband under his jacket as he raced for the pickup. Grant wasn't there.

He'd been right when he said that the next time his frat brother caught up with them, they would deal with the kangaroo first.

He caught the edge of the tarp as the wind caught the already unsnapped section and pulled more off. Where was Grant? He looked into the bed. His staff was gone.

Of course, it was gone. He'd been wielding it the last time he'd affected the weather.

There was the flash of what he thought was lightning, but no accompanying thunder. He turned quickly enough to make out forms in the field behind the building. Three people facing one, he thought.

Thomas ran toward them. If that wasn't Grant holding off three of his brothers, then someone else had worse luck than Thomas.

The clouds thinned enough Thomas could see it was indeed Grant, but the other three looked wrong to be his frat brothers, and each one held something. One pointed the thing they held. Was that a wand? And what was that bulbous thing at the end? Light shot out of it, and Thomas could make out the wand was transparent, and it wasn't a bulb, but a lens at the end. Grant swept his staff before him, causing the wind to pick up the snow as well as the beam of light, deflecting it away.

Thomas fought the surprise. However it was that wind could affect light, Grant was still in trouble.

A man in a suit moved to Grant's left and raised his staff, which looked to Thomas like a metal version of Grant's without as many nails in them, or any twine. A metal drum pulled out of a snowbank and launched itself at Grant. Another sweep of his staff and the kangaroo had the wind sending the barrel in another direction.

Of course, the how was obviously magic.

The third person raised his—was that a shovel, and then planted the spade into the snow. The ground heaved, sending snow in the air. The earth rolled and sent Grant stumbling back. He used his staff to remain standing.

"No!" Thomas yelled as the one, a woman, with the transparent—it had to be glass—rod swept the staff out with a beam of light. Grant fell, but didn't let go of it.

Thomas stumbled as he put his foot on a softer patch of snow, stumbled, and then realized it was the ground shifting under his feet that was making standing difficult. He stumbled forward, put his foot down, intent on continuing, but it wouldn't come up as the ground settled, and earth climbed up his foot and calf.

"You lost Grant!" the one holding the metal staff yelled into the wind. Now Thomas would make out

that instead of long pieces, like Grant's wooden one, it was composed of a bunch of smaller ones, and each seemed to have one end of them painted red. "You know how far I'm willing to go. Unless you do it, that kid's going to die a slow and painful death."

The earth was up to his knee and no matter how hard Thomas pulled, he couldn't get out of it.

Then the words registered, and he stared at the standoff. How could they be after Grant? Thomas was the one being hunted.

Dumbass. Why else would someone have a pickup that warded him from being found? How could he have missed that until—

"Thomas!" Grant yelled, getting to his feet, the wind picking up again. "Get to the pickup and drive to Denver!"

"Vincent!" the metal staff holder called. "Being the kid here. Grant knows him, so I want him to see the look in his eyes as you fill his lungs with dirt."

Thomas pulled against the ground as he was dragged toward them.

"Kinsley!" Grant yelled and slammed the end of his staff on the ground.

The man with the metal staff swore and put distance between him and Grant. The woman with the glass rod was slower to react, but she too backed away.

Instead of a lightning bolt striking the ground, a funnel of dark clouds descended on the man with the shovel planted in the ground. It hit and pulled up, dragging the man with it. He held onto the shovel's handle, dangling in the air as the wind whipped him around. He yelled something that didn't make it out of the funnel, then he and the shovel were going up and vanished in the air.

"Go!" Grant yelled as the earth fell off Thomas's leg.

"You think that's going to save the kid?" the woman mocked, raising her rod. "You didn't even kill Vincent. Knowing you, he's going to fall in a lake or something. How anyone thought you deserved to be given the honor of a staff is beyond me."

"I wasn't given anything!" Grant snarled. "I made my way!" he spun his staff before him and the wind responded. "Thomas, run! I'm going to hold them back." Instead of moving around them, the wind now moved toward Grant with enough strength the two remaining adversaries were pulled along, even if Thomas only felt a slight pull from it.

He hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the waiting pickup.

"Go! I'm going to be fine!" Grant yelled.

Thomas was partially turned toward his escape when the implication of what Grant said hit him. In every movie he'd watched, anytime a character told another they'd be fine, it was because they were about to make their last stand.

The only times those characters survived was when the person being told to run didn't obey them.

Thomas wasn't going to be the one leaving the person who'd saved him from his frat brother to die.

With a thought, he was next to the kangaroo. He really should have done that from the start. He could teleport. Why did he keep running places?

"What are you doing?" Grant snarled as Thomas put an arm around the kangaroo. "I told you to run."

"Don't let them run off!" the guy with the metal staff yelled.

"That's what I'm doing!" Thomas yelled back. "But my way."

Oh, he really hoped this was going to work. He didn't want to have to explain to Grant why he'd died alongside him.

Please, he pleaded to Him. Let it be because I didn't want Yating to be hurt in the fire that he ended up in my bedroom with me, and not because his cock was in my ass. He looked around for any safe place, then his eyes burned under light the intensity of the sun. Grant yelled in pain, too.

No. No-no-no. This couldn't be happening.

Thomas had to hang onto Grant harder as the wind picked up.

He needed to see where he was teleporting, and teleporting was the only way he could get them both to safety.

Over the wind, he heard laughter. A man laughing. It was filled with nastiness, promises of pain, and death.

Thomas had to take them away from that man, from this place, right now. They needed to be somewhere safe!

The laughter ended, as did the wind, and any other sounds.

"What?" Grant said, sounding confused.

And Thomas's consciousness decided that now was a good time to wink out.

Chapter 20

Bozeman, MT, January 17th

Thomas grunted as the cock in his ass twitched, then muttered. “Don’t stop.” Just as the guy pulled out of him.

“Fuck,” Grant said as he rolled off and flopped next to him. “I thought you were going to die on me.”

“Did I fall asleep?” He was so tired thinking was hard, but he couldn’t have been tired enough that he wouldn’t have made it to the bed. And why was the floor so damned cold?

“You passed out. What is this place?”

Thomas opened an eye and looked at a rough stone floor illuminated by daylight coming in from somewhere. He’d get a better look if he raised his head, but it was so comfortable, resting on his arms.

“Dunno,” he said, the word slurred.

You brought us here, Thomas,” Grant said, sounding somewhat exasperated for some reason. You have to know where we are.”

“If you say so.” The yawn that followed cracked his jaw. “Ask me again after my nap, and then a fuck, and maybe more napping—ow!” the slap at the back of the head had him fully awake now.

“Don’t you dare fall asleep on me,” Grant told him.

Thomas tried to resist the hand that grabbed his muzzle and turned his head until he was looking into the kangaroo’s searching eyes, but he didn’t have the strength.

“I guess not all the stories are true. Society guys aren’t roaring to go after just one fuck.”

“I’ll fuck you if you want.” Thomas tried to put a hand under him, but dragging his arm took almost more strength than he had, and someone had put a ton of weights on his back. “Roll me over and you can sit on my cock.”

“Is that going to help you?” Grant asked.

“You’re going to love it.” The rat yawned. “I promise.”

“Don’t fall asleep,” Grant snapped, shaking him. “Thomas, does fucking a guy restore your energy?”

“Yes?” he answered with a tentative shrug, which his body barely executed.

Grant ran a hand over his face. “Right. I’m the one with all the answers here.” Thomas smiled as Grant took his pants off and lay them next to the rat. “I did see you fuck guys without stopping, so I’m going to hope that’s a yes on recharging your normal batteries.” He rolled Thomas onto the pants and looked at his crotch, smiling. “Not that I won’t enjoy myself, but remember that the goal is to get you sufficiently conscious so you’ll answer my question.” He straddled Thomas’s waist. “I really should have worked on something around the concepts of potency, since I know fucking you works, but I can’t risk that you have the time I need to figure out something that’ll get me hard again just using what’s we brought with us.

Thomas had a comeback ready. It was a great one too, Thomas was sure of it, but he opened his muzzle as Grant lowered himself and it was a moan that escaped instead of words as his cock entered the hot, slick ass.

This was way better than any comeback he’d had.

He tried to grab for the hips as the kangaroo undulated on his cock, but his hands weighed a ton each. It felt too good to let Grant do all the work, but he couldn’t even thrust.

“Fuck,” Grant whispered, eyes half closed. “That is a good cock.”

Thomas grinned and with a grunt of effort, one of his hands was grabbing onto the kangaroo’s hip. Another grunt and his pelvis thrust forward and Thomas moaned.

“Feeling better?” Grant asked, tightening his ass.

“No,” Thomas replied once he could breathe again. “I’m going to have to fuck you a few times more.” He had his other hand on the kangaroo’s other hip and he grabbed on.

“I don’t think we—” the rest was a gasp as Thomas thrust in hard and hit that sweet spot. One of the many things his frat brother had taught him in his months residing at the frat was how to use his cock to shut up guys, even when it wasn’t shoved in their muzzle.

Grant caught his breath, opened his muzzle, and Thomas thrust hard again, and it was another grunt instead of words that came out. After the third attempt, the kangaroo got the message, squeezed Thomas’s cock, and moved in time with the rat. That had him cumming loudly and then panting hard as he relaxed, but it was easier to think.

“Fuck, I needed that.”

“Well, that sounds more coherent,” Grant said, as Thomas noticed the irregular stone walls and the grotto’s ceiling of time-polished broken stones.

“How did we get here?”

“You brought us,” Grant replied. “Where is here?”

His visual search brought his gaze to the kangaroo’s flaccid cock. “You didn’t cum.” He reached for it; Thomas wasn’t the kind of guy who didn’t make sure his—

“Focus, Thomas,” Grant said, grabbing his hand. “Where are we?”

“This is the grotto on my grandfather’s property. Although, it’s too warm. I mean, it’s always been warmer than it should. I think there’s—”

“Focus,” Grant said, tone sharp with exasperation. “I managed to get something going before I started waking you up.”

Thomas snickered. “Is *that* what they called it in your day?”

Grant glared at him. “I’m not that old. It’s what I call fucking a Society guy who nearly killed himself getting us here. You grandfather, that’s the one on Bozeman?”

Thomas held the kangaroo in place as he started standing. “I want to fuck you again. And yes, that’s him.”

“My ass needs a rest.”

“But you’re still soft.”

“I’m not like you,” Grant replied, pulling the hands away, and they dropped to the floor without something to hold on to. “My refractory period is measured in... well, not in nanoseconds.”

“About sucking me off, then? That’s going to help, right?” he shuddered as Grant stood and the cool air made his cock shiver.

“I can’t talk with my mouth full.” He stretched and Thomas admired the toned body. “How did you do this? You said you need to see where you’re teleporting to.”

Had he forgotten to mention those? “There were two times. I told out about the flash fire at the frat, right?” He had to since he’d told him how he’d ended up on the run from them. “And then there was—” His muzzle snapped shut.

* * * * *

Bozeman, MT, December 24th

Thomas hurried to close the door to his grandfather’s office, hoping it would also close on the images hearing his brother grunting through the door of the bedroom they were forced to share had conjured, and he leaned back.

Fuck. He did not need to know his younger, his hot, buff, younger brother was jerking off only two doors down. He looked at the tent in his pants. He certainly didn’t need to want to go back, go in the room, and give Roland something to grunt again. To moan about, to have him begging for Thomas to do more to him.

He strangled a cry. That was his brother, not some hot guy at university. What the fuck was wrong with him?

At least he’d made it to his grandfather’s office. The one room in the house no one wanted as theirs because the murphy bed was so old as to be all spring and no padding. Thomas had opted to sleep in the same bed as Roland because that level of uncomfortableness would have been better than the murphy-bed—sure keep telling yourself that was why—but right now, there was no way he was sleeping in the same room as his brother, even if he wanted to wait until he was done. But it was too fucking late. He’d eaten too much, and he needed to lie down.

He pulled the fake bookcase and the musty ‘trying to pass itself off as a mattress’ came down. This wasn’t going to be comfortable, but it was the only option left.

Naked, he stretched on the bed. The search for some comfortable position was quickly eclipsed by the pole jutting out of his crotch.

“Will you give it a rest?” he asked his cock. His cock was too hard to answer. “Fuck, how can you be such a needy bastard?”

With the images he was fighting against running through his head? How could it not? He was stroking it before he realized it. And moaning as he remembered he wasn’t in a bathroom or had access to a hot mouth to wrap around it to avoid making a mess.

But there is one, two doors down, the dirty, nasty part of his mind reminded him.

What did he used to use before he'd had constant access to guys? He looked at his clothes. Did he really want dried cum on his underwear? Or to walk around with it on his socks. That one was probably safer, but with his luck, Roland would notice something and bend down to—

Get out of the fucking gutter.

He spotted the box of tissue on the corner of the desk and had a handful of them out before his mind could offer more forbidden ways to not have to use them.

He was back to stroking himself, only it was Roland's hand on his cock, looking him in the eyes, smiling lustfully as he lowered his muzzle, tongue flicking out to lick—

Bad, bad subconscious.

He had an unending list of memories to feed his fantasy. Why did he have to constantly think of his brother?

Okay, he wasn't letting his subconscious control this. He could go with Madoc, pounding him in the gym's sauna after an arduous weight lifting session. He moaned at that memory, his hand moving on his cock.

Felix, hate fucking him after Thomas had yet again snipped him over and over in the matches the Shoot-'em-up game had pitted their team against one another.

Limbani, pulling him into the university restroom stall right next to the teacher's lounge and sucking him off in that way the monkey did that made it nearly impossible for Thomas not to scream as he came.

Paul.

Thomas moaned deeply, his hand tightening on his shaft at the memory of taking his best friend for the first time, and the knowledge they were going to do it again, and do more.

Chima.

Thomas almost came as he remembered the Adonis of a hyena with that bestial mask on pounding his ass. Losing himself in the empty orbs. The power that filled him when he returned the fucking in kind, the hyena the one laying on the altar, again wearing that mask that made him someone-something more. The others had only played dress-up when they fucked Thomas wearing it, but on Chima, it was something div—

"What cabinet are the pictures in, Grandpa?" Judith called out, pushing the door opened

Terror stopped time on the edge of his orgasm. His sister was about to catch him not just jerking off, but cumming. She was never going to let him live this down. He needed something, anything, to hide. His clothes? On the floor, out of reach. The bed covers. Under him. Why hadn't he gotten under them before stating this?

His heart beat so fast it might drill its way out of his chest as the door started moving again, and he made out his sister's head, turning to look in the room, and see him!

He couldn't be here! It wasn't safe. He needed to be elsewhere now!

* * * * *

Bozeman, MT, January 17th

"I was blinded, and all I could think about was being somewhere safe."

Grant looked around in mild disbelief. "Well, you probably saved my life, so thanks." He offered Thomas his hand. "Let's see if you can stand on your own two feet."

Thomas threw his hand up and Grant caught it, then pulled, and immediately the kangaroo had to support his weight.

"I'm good," Thomas said as Grant lowered him back to the floor

"You're better," Grant said with a chuckle. "But not up to standing. I wish I had more of those lube packets from the bathhouse on me."

Thomas chuckled. "I still can't believe you stole lube from the bathhouse."

"You know what?" Grant said, kneeling around the rat's neck. "I don't need you mocking my supplying habits." He shoved his soft cock in the eager muzzle. "Get me hard again."

Thomas moaned as he licked and moved the cock in his muzzle.

"Fuck," Grant exclaimed, and Thomas grinned as the cock hardened. "Is that more Society magic?"

Thomas pulled back, and the cock bounced out and at attention. "Maybe being close to me is filtering that white light of yours toward sex. Now, fuck me." He forced Grant to stand as he rolled onto his stomach, then hissed as his crotch came into contact with the cold floor. He shoved the discarded back under him in time for Grant to lie on top.

The kangaroo fucked him hard and fast, as if he wanted this to be done and over with.

Thomas thought he should take his time and really enjoy it. He smiled. He certainly was.

Grant thrust hard and grunted. The cock twitched and Thomas sighed in delight as cum filled him, and his mind cleared.

"Who were those guys?" he asked, remembering they hadn't been his frat brothers and had been after Grant, not Thomas.

Grant lay on top of him, panting. "You're really going to ask about that now?"

Thomas tightened his ass on the softening cock, making the kangaroo grunt.

"Unless you want to put those hot lips around my cock so you can't talk with your mouth full..."

Grant rolled off him.

Thomas turned and sat. He was sore, but he no longer felt like there was an entire building resting on him. He found his pants and threw the ones he'd been on to the kangaroo. He'd take them off once they were fucking again, but for now, the stone floor was too fucking cold.

Grant put them on, then his jacket before leaning against the wall. "They're called the Chamber."

"So, they're an enemy faction?"

Grant snorted. "If only it was that simple."

Chapter 21

Bozeman, MT, January 17th

“Well,” Thomas said when Grant didn’t add anything. “You know why I have people after me. And they had those things. That woman had the glass rod, and she threw light at you. One had a shovel, and the other had a staff, kind of like yours, except—”

“It’s nothing like mine!”

Thomas was surprised at the vehemence. “Well, it’s metal and not wood, so—”

“That’s not—” Grant closed his mouth and seemed to swallow his anger. When he spoke again, it was in a calmer tone. “That isn’t what I mean.” He placed his staff on his lap. “I made this. I crafted my connection to the universe when I did. I poured my dreams and my hopes into it and...” he shook his head.

“They stole their staves; it doesn’t matter what it looked like, that’s what they are. They didn’t make anything. They’re nothing more than parasites sucking Practitioners like me dry so they can steal what the connection they made.”

“They suck the magic out of people?” Thomas surprised himself by realizing the accidental innuendo didn’t make him smile.

Grant sighed and rested his head back against the stone wall. “That was the wrong analogy to make.” He closed his eyes. “Remember when I told you how we, Practitioners, deal with the concept of the universe, its potential?”

“The spotlight, not the filters,” Thomas answered.

“That is a lot of energy. The gods, in limiting what you can do, limit the easy by which you can hurt yourself simply by using your magic.” He held up a finger, and Thomas closed his mouth. “You can still kill yourself if you push too hard, too fast, but it becomes ever more difficult the harder you push, the faster you go.” He gently ran the finger along his staff. “We don’t have that limitation. We can channel as much energy as we want and it never gets any harder. And as a result, we can burn out much easier than you can. That’s what could have happened to me as I powered the storm ever harder to fight them. If it had happened, all that would have been left is my staff. They would have taken it, handed it to whoever served their agenda the best.”

The silence stretched as Thomas thought about what Grant said, what he’d seen of the fight. “Could one of them have burned out fighting you?” he asked tentatively.

“No.” The flat answer had a sense of finality to it, but then the kangaroo sighed. “Because they steal their staves, the Chamber don’t have the investment in it, the deep connection with the universe I obtained when I crafted mine. It means that one of them can never bring the level of power I can to a fight, but it also means they don’t have to worry about burning out. It’s a powerful tool, but nothing more.” He closed his eyes. “It’s also why they ambushed me in that fight, instead of putting a bullet in my head from a quarter-mile away. I have to die while channeling all that energy. Otherwise, this is just a piece of wood to them.”

“So your staff is what they’re after.”

Grant let out an angry bark of laughter. “Oh, it’s only one of the many reasons Kingsley wants me dead.” The smile he gave Thomas wasn’t exactly pleasant. “I’ve been making a habit of getting in their way.”

Thomas gave a slow nod, the information providing context. “The good Samaritan thing. We didn’t meet by accident, did we?”

The kangaroo studied Thomas as he thought. “No. But also yes.”

“Care to clarify?”

Grant smiled. “I have a talisman, it’s what Practitioners call the magical items we make, like your armband. It’s in the truck, and it’s constantly looking for someone new to magic and in way over their heads. So no, it wasn’t luck that we met, because you happened to fit those criteria. But, it was also luck in a way, because, you shouldn’t have been. The other factions are much more structured than we are. Because of that, anyone who comes in their magic does so under controlled conditions. The Society has rituals, un top of having to be born into it, which you should have undergone before your magic activated. I don’t know what they are. So when I picked you up, it wasn’t someone from the Society I was expecting, but a new Practitioner who had no idea why he was being hunted down by someone he used to consider a... friend.”

Thomas readied himself for the answer to his next question. “What does it mean for us now that you know I’m not who you wanted to protect. Will you—”

"I knew you were Society when that rat said you were related."

Thomas gave him an eye-roll. "Mine and Madoc's grandmothers were sisters. So sure, we share blood, but calling us related seems a bit much, and the way he was talking, you'd think I was he brother, instead of just a frat brother. But you shouldn't—"

"That doesn't matter, Thomas. I didn't abandon you when I realized which faction you were. I'm not that heartless." Grant fell silent, then smiled. "So, we're going to deal with the situation you're in right now, and right here. After that we can figure out what to do."

"So..." Thomas smiled hopefully. "Fucking?"

Grant rolled his eyes. "Yes, but this is the last one. We need to get moving after that."

"Don't worry, I'm going to make this one really great."

* * * * *

Bozeman, MT, January 17th

"No fucking way," Thomas muttered, leaning against the shed. He couldn't have seen right. He glanced around again. There was a gray van parked behind his grandfather's SUV. It could have been a delivery van, and that should be where his mind went as he'd seen it, or maybe one of his many girlfriend owned a van like that and she was visiting, now that Magnus's self imposed sexual hiatus was over.

Only, what were the odds one of them owned a van the exact gray of Gilbert's, with signs of electrical burns over it and plywood where the windows were blown out.

The kangaroo looked around the shed at it too.

"So," Thomas said, "the town?"

Grant shook his head. "It's too far. Them being here means we can't go to your grandfather for help, but we still need supplies. Food, first aid kit. Some crafting material would be welcome."

Thomas's question was silenced as the back door of the ranch house opened and they received their confirmation of who's van it was in the form of Olavo, followed by Felix and Limbani stepping outside. Whatever they were talking about didn't carry over the distance.

"Can't you blow them away like you did to the Shoveler in Lewiston?" Thomas whispered.

Grant studied their surroundings and whispered back. "How do you feel about your grandfather's house losing its roof, or a tree going through a wall?"

Thomas looked at him in disbelief. "Like I'd rather it not happen, why?"

"This isn't an instrument of precision." Grant hefted his staff. "It's more of an area of effect one."

"The funnel just got one."

Grant snorted. "That's because they knew to spread far apart and we were on an open field. And he wasn't who I was targeting. Here, trying to get them might end up with me throwing the SUV in the air, trees around, and ripping the walls off."

"Then I don't know that we can do anything," Thomas said. "Because unless Limbani tells them he saw something elsewhere, I don't see them leaving." He thought about something. "Can you give him a vision of is elsewhere?"

Grant thought about it. "Not with what I have on me. I'd need my supplies from the pickup, but—" he pulled Thomas to the other side of the shed as his frat brothers went back in, and pointed to second story window with a light on in it. "How do you feel about committing some larceny?"

* * * * *

Bozeman, MT, January 17th

Thomas dropped a few feet on appearing, and landed as quietly as he could and remained still, listening. After a few seconds without anyone rushing up the stairs, yelling that he'd arrived, he looked his grand father's bedroom.

The room was now immaculate, and unoccupied. Clearly, Thomas's household got their messiness from the Royer side of the family

He checked over the attached bathroom. Also empty and clean.

He cracked the door open and listened to the house. Conversation came from the living room. Too faint to understand from being down the stairs and on the other side of the kitchen, but he recognized Magnus's voice. The others would be his frat brothers, and the odds were good Thomas was the subject of the conversation.

Having confirmed he wasn't in danger of being discovered immediately, he went through the closet.

His grandfather had a surprisingly large number of winter clothing because of both visiting family, and his girlfriends.

Magnus had a surprising number of them who weren't used to Bozeman winters, or Northern US winters period.

He pulled two of the overcoats out and laid them on the bed. Neither he nor Grant had worn winter walkabout clothing as they'd exited the pickup. At the back of the closet, he found a backpack. Thomas emptied the hunting supplies from it and took it along as he exited the room after confirming the hall was empty.

He tiptoed toward the stairs, and froze as grunts came from a partially opened door ahead of him. Once he understood what was happening to make the sounds, he moved again, peeing in to the room as he passed it.

Olavo was fucking Yating hard, a hand over his mouth turning whatever scream of ecstasy the red panda made into the grunts to go along with the capybara's.

Thomas smiled. If only they understood how misplaced their attempt at discretion was. Manus didn't care how loud the sex got in his house. He might even consider it a challenge to be louder than them, if one of his girlfriend was present.

Passed the door, he heard new sounds through the closed one closer to the stairs, voices. He paused and pressed his ear to it.

"Why aren't we leaving already?" Gilbert asked plaintively.

The sigh was pure Limbani when he had to explain the obvious. "I saw us remaining here until tomorrow night."

"But why?" this time the armadillos question was in a reasonable tone.

"Nothing in what I saw explained that."

"Fucking Precogs," Gilbert grumbled. "I hare the lot of you. Never a straight answer when we need one."

"Oh really?" The monkey snickered. "You want something straight from me? How about I straight up fuck you?"

Thomas moved on. So, he and Grant had until tomorrow night before they had to worry about being pursued.

By his frat brothers at least.

He took the steps slowly, coming to a full stop as one creaked.

"Damn it Henry," Madoc said, his voice muffled by the closed window. "Did Raphael tell you anything about this guy? I get that Limbani's visions are always true, but you know what he looks for. He got us here and we're staying until tomorrow night, but he didn't see Thomas, and I can't exactly go back inside and demand he tell me Thomas's whereabouts without knowing something of who he is."

Thomas stepped down until he could see outside through the large window over the sink. Madoc was pacing on the porch, phone to his hear.

"His grandfather? Are you sure? I met his grandmother, and there didn't seem to be a man in her life. No, the sense I got was that he died. No, Thomas never mentioned family out here. How didn't he show up in any of the searches Raphael had done if they're close enough Thomas would come here? No, never mind," the rat immediately added. "That man would never consider Thomas's mother's family to be of interest. If it doesn't have a dick, or isn't popping out sons for the family, they might as well not exist. Fuck," Madoc said tiredly, "I wish someone took over from him so we can go back to the way things used to be. Don't tell him I said that." Madoc chuckled after listening for a few seconds. "I know. He's doing the best he can." He sighed. "Balls. Okay, I'll be as discreet as I can in my questions and maybe something about where Thomas is will fall out. I'll call you tomorrow for an update, unless I have something to report before that."

The rat put his phone away and reached for the door.

Fuck, Thomas had been so engrossed in listening in he'd stayed right there, in view of anyone entering. He had to hide. He considered going back up the stair, but saw the open pantry door on the other side of the kitchen. He willed himself there and moved as far back as he could. Madoc would have to walk past it, but unless he decided to grab a snack, Thomas should be fine.

He hoped.

The rat walked by and Thomas sighed in relief.

"Are you going to explain yourself, young man?" an irritated Magnus demanded.

Madoc's answer was too soft for Thomas to make out. He stepped forward, hoping to listen in.

"Where are the cleaners?" Felix demanded and Thomas almost threw himself into the back of the

pantry in surprise. Were the cleaners in here?

“Under the sink,” he grandfather answered.

“Where did he get this?” the otters whispered after a few seconds with enough awe in his voice Thomas moved until he could make him out.

Felix ran a hand on the wooden table, then crouched to look a chair over. No, he was studying them. Chouteau was what? A fan of wood furniture? The otter’s bedroom was all solid wood furniture, but he’d expected that was because they were expensive. He’d never seen him act like that around them. Not that Felix had ever allowed Thomas more than a glimpse of his room. It might be the one room in the entire frat Thomas hadn’t had sex in.

Although, now it put in perspective some of the otter’s comments about the metal and plastic dining table, or some of the modern couch in the ground floor living room.

Felix pulled himself away from the chairs and searched the cabinet under the sink. It took out a small can and a clean cloth before returning to the living room.

“I hope you don’t mind,” the otter said with what sounded like a hint of respect.

Thomas was so surprised Felix could speak without sneering to someone he wasn’t clearly better off than he was he missed the rest.

He shook himself. He wasn’t here to be amazed that Chouteau had a shred of decency in him. He needed supplies.

He filled the backpack with jerky, water bottles, the handful of old heating pads he found under a pack of pemican, which he also added. The cans of fruits he carefully placed in to keep them from knocking together.

Once the pack was full he hefted it over a shoulder and... how was he going to make it across the room with the now open door to the living room? He’d have to be quick and quiet or someone would—

What was he doing?

He had to stop thinking like the old him. He didn’t have to run across the kitchen.

He looked at the stairs.

He could will himself to the other side.

Then he willed himself to the top, then his grandfather’s bedroom door. He grabbed the bottle of lube on the bedside table, he Put an over coat on, and gathered the other. He looked out of the window at the shed, then he stood next to the kangaroo, offering him an overcoat.

“Larceny accomplished.”

Chapter 22

Bozeman, MT, January 17th

Thomas rushed into the fast-food restaurant as soon as Grant opened the door. He considered teleporting in, but that was begging for his frat brothers to take up the chase.

The walk through the snow had started nice enough; a relaxing trek through the woods until they came across the road, then following that to the outskirts of Bozeman. It had been cold, but Thomas was from Minnesota. He knew cold.

Of course, just like the previous visits to his grandfather, he'd forgotten that Bozeman went from cold when the sun was shining on you, to, fucking cold when clouds covered to, Oh, My God, this is fucking frigid! Once the sun set. That had happened an hour ago.

"I'm never setting for in winter weather again," he stammered, willing the heat to soak into him and stop his shivering.

"So, the next part of the plan is moving to Florida?" Grant asked. "Anywhere north of that experiences winter." Thomas settled for glaring at the chuckling kangaroo. "Grab us a table while I get us coffee to go with the trail-mix."

Thomas headed for the center of the eating area. No one could pay him enough to be any closer to the windows, and leaking cold, than that at the moment. He didn't even want to look at the outside, so he sat facing the counter and watched Grant return with two large cardboard cups.

"Are we allowed to eat the food we brought?" Thomas asked as the kangaroo handed him a coffee.

Grant looked around at the nearly empty restaurant. "So long as we buy something," he raised his cup, while Thomas let his warm his hands, "and drink what passes as coffee, we are technically a customer and unless we make a nuisance of ourselves, they won't kick us out." He made a face after a sip. "Eat up. You're going to need the energy."

He let go of the cup and looked through the backpack for the trail mix. "I thought I got mine doing the horizontal mambo?"

"Oh, I'm sure there's a way you guys can make that happen," Grant replied as he stirred creamer into his coffee. "But a full belly is its own pleasure."

Thomas looked at the trail mix pack he handed to the kangaroo. "I'm going to need more than one of these to experience a full belly." He paused and smiled. "Unless you're volunteering to add to my stomach's content."

Grant looked at him. "Don't you ever get—never mind. Doesn't matter how much you coax out of me. I'm not talented enough to fill it." He carefully opened the pack and picked a nut out of it.

Thomas ripped his open. "So, what's the plan?" He dumped the content in his mouth.

Grant continued eating. Taking a raisin and popping that in his mouth, then a small seed. Thomas stifled his sigh. This was going to be another case of not getting any—

"The Chamber showing up changes things," the kangaroo said.

Thomas looked around worriedly, then leaned in, lowering his voice. "Should you be saying their names out loud like that?"

Grant chuckled. "It's not like me saying it is going to make them appear next to us. They can't 'listen' for me saying Chamber. They'd have to set something to pick up every utterance of the word 'chamber'. Imagine this magical light going off in their face every time chamber is said by someone in the US, let alone the entire world." He took another sip of his coffee. "So long as we don't do something that'll bring the authorities down on us, the worse we have to worry about is people moving away from us weirdos."

Thomas paused, the cup to his lips. "The cops work for the Chamber?" he asked in a mix of fear and amazement.

"No. Getting arrested is never a good idea."

"Oh. Got it. So not talking about m—taking over the word in public." He sipped his coffee and made a face, too. He added sugar. He usually drank his unmolested, but this was so bitter he didn't feel like he was ruining coffee, just making whatever this was palatable. "I don't understand what having them involved

changes.”

“They aren’t after you,” Grant said after a stretching silence.

Thomas tested his ‘coffee’ while he waited for more, considered if he could do anything to salvage it and realized he’d given up on making it taste like anything that swill and still Grant hadn’t elaborated. “And?”

The kangaroo sighed. “And it’s best that I make sure they don’t have a reason to notice you.”

Thomas stared at him. “Grant, I grabbed you and we vanished out from under their noses. I think they’ve noticed me already.”

“That’s right,” Grand said. “But they don’t have a way to track you. Me, on the other hand, they have definitely found a way to pierce the wards I have set up.” He paused. “I’m not safe to be around.”

“But,” Thomas countered, the implications of what Grant said causing him to speak hurriedly, “with me there, you can get out of whatever trap they try on you. I saved from them already. I can do it again.”

“You can’t keep me safe, Thomas,” Grant replied calmly. “Even if you could get me to the other side of the planet, we’re up against magic. They’d find me in hours, and they’d get whoever is local to capture me, and you. You can’t think of the Chamber as a US organization. Or any of the factions. Magic is worldwide. You’d have to get me out of that trap and the next one, and the one after that. You getting me here left you nearly dead. Eventually, they’d clue in on that and they would take advantage of it.”

“But it’s not always going to be like that,” Thomas protested, his fear growing. “The more I do it, the easier it’s going to get, right?”

Grant shook his head. “This is magic, Thomas. There is no telling how it’s going to work, at least, I can’t tell you. And unlike what movies would have you believing, training while under fire only leads to you dying. I’m not going to be the reason that happens.”

Thomas felt the heat of the cup, but it didn’t warm him at all. “You’re dumping me.”

“I’m not dumping you, Thomas. And really, mellow drama? What are you, six?” Grant asked. “I am maximizing your changes of survival. You need to be safe, and that means you’re going to Denver. If I’m anywhere near you, you’re going to share the bullseye that’s currently on my back.”

Thomas sighed. The reasoning made sense, but that didn’t help. “Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know. Until I’ve gotten my hands on specific material, there’s little I can do.” He sipped his cup. “I’d love to get my pickup back, but Kingsley knows how important it is to me, so he’s going to expect that. I just don’t know, Thomas.”

“How will I get in touch with you?” Thomas asked, hoping for a different answer than what he expected.

“You don’t.”

“What if I need help?” Thomas asked, fighting to keep his voice from rising.

“You can’t count on me,” Grant replied, tone sharp. He rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. “I don’t want to leave, Thomas. But right now, I am a threat to you. I’m more of one than your friends, or this Raphael. They want you alive. They seem to think that it’s for your own good. If the Chamber gets their hands on you.” He faltered and fear entered his expression. “Thomas, you don’t want that to happen.”

Thomas nodded resignedly. It wasn’t like Grant was his friend, so he didn’t owe him anything. But he’d been the one who’d come to his help when no one else had. He and his family were the only ones, and his family was in Minneapolis, and now, Grant would be God knew where. And really, he was no worse off than when he started.

Only it didn’t feel that way. He hadn’t felt this alone when his father had watched him leave on the bus.

He couldn’t dwell on the past. He only had the rest of the day and tomorrow to get as much distance between himself and his frat brothers. “Once I’m in Denver, where do I go? Your friend mentioned a... Benton?”

“Denton,” Grant corrected. “Denton Brislow, but they said no when I mentioned him. I just wish my phone hadn’t... died before they said where you should go.” He took a few nuts from the mix. “There might be another Society family in Denver, but I don’t know who they’d be. Most of what I know about them is second-hand.”

“Okay, so not Denton Brislow,” Thomas said bitterly. “And anyone else I might go to, you don’t know the name of.” He rubbed his temple and fought the desire to blame the kangaroo along with the mounting headache. “I guess that leaves hanging around bathhouses, waiting until one of them reveals themselves by accidentally doing something magical.”

Grant chuckled. “That’s not likely to happen; accidental magic is rare. And the kind of bathhouse rich men like those in the Society might frequent wouldn’t let you even look at the door.”

"Then what, Grant?" Thomas demanded, throwing his hands in this air. The couple at a table by a window looked in their directions and Thomas forced his voice quieter. "What do you expect me to do? The extent of my experiences with being on the run is limited to movies, and in those, a good samaritan shows up to rescue the protagonist, and that's already happened with you. You think I can count on it happening a second time?"

Grant looked conflicted, then ran a hand over his face. "Okay, with no other information, Denton's your best bet and hopefully Jules's reasons for not liking him aren't disastrous."

"Okay." Thomas felt better with even the semblance of a plan. "Where does he live?"

The kangaroo opened his mouth, paused, then closed it. He pulled his phone, stared at the screen Thomas knew was still blank since Grant hadn't had to time to look it over since it had malfunctioned.

"You're going to have to look him up when you get to Denver."

"Look him up, how?" Thomas asked in disbelief. "It's not like I have my own phone, and I can't get one, since I'm going to need what money I have left to survive until I do find him."

Grant smiled. "Why Thomas. There are those magical places where you can find all the information you'd ever want, and some you don't. Not only in the books that are there," he added, his smile turning into a grin as Thomas's expression darkened, "but by using the computers they let anyone there have access to. They are called."

"I'm a college freshman, Grant," Thomas replied. "I know what a library is. Which is why I know I need an ID to get on a computer in them."

Grant pulled a card and handed it to Thomas. "How do you think I got you in the bathhouse?"

Thomas looked at the driver's license. He frowned. It was his face, his name. The birth date was wrong, and the address claimed he lived in New Salem, North Dakota, but otherwise, this could be his license. He turned it over for an indication of the magic Grant had used to make it.

The kangaroo chuckled. "It's the magic of knowing people. You don't have to worry, it's not going to turn into a pumpkin at midnight."

Thomas stared and decided that wasn't worth asking about. "Okay, so I can find Denton Brislow, go to him and... tell him what?"

"As much as you're comfortable telling him." Grant sighed. "Look, I don't know the guy, just the stories floating around about him. They all pretty much agree that he's one of the good guys out there. That's why I mentioned him to Jules. But that they disagreed serves as a reminder they're just stories. I'd say to at least mention the Lewistons are after you, even if you won't tell him why."

"Okay." Thomas breathed in and out, unable to not think of everything that had happened since he'd ran out of Minneapolis. "What do I do if that doesn't work?"

"Thomas—" Grant started, sounding annoyed.

"No, Grant," Thomas cut him off and raised a finger. "I was supposed to take the bus to my grandfather's, just be intercepted on the way there." He raised a second one. "We were supposed to drive to Denver together, and we got intercepted." He raised a third. "We decide to ask my grandfather for his help, but the guys are already there, waiting for us." He lowered his hand. "I think I'm entitled to think I need a backup plan at this point."

Grant's smile was forced. "You make a valid point. Let me think."

While Grant did that, Thomas pulled another mix from the pack. His appetite had fled at the start of these changes in the plans, but he'd need the energy now more than ever. He even finished the swill while Grant searched his pockets and pulled a crumpled envelope from one. He wrote something inside it, sealed it, then offered it to him.

"This is your break glass in case of fire."

Thomas stared at him. He'd heard that one before. "You're dating yourself with that old movie reference."

"I am not that old," the kangaroo protested. "Those movies are good. You should try them one day." He pulled his hand away as Thomas reach for the envelope. "This is important. Don't open it. If all hell breaks loose, the first thing you do is head to San Francisco. Whatever else, you must be within the city limits before you open this envelope. If you cross them with the information, it contains in your head. You will lose any chance of getting help."

Thomas nodded slowly, and when Grant offered him the envelope again, he took it as if he was handed a live bomb. He only relaxed once it was in his overcoat's pocket.

"What I can tell you," Grant said, "is that the instructions I wrote will take you to someone who can protect you. That help isn't going to be free. She doesn't do anything for free. But show her what you can do,

and I promise she'll be incentivized to keep you safe."

"So, I'm the payment?"

Grant's sigh was resigned. "Thomas, you need to understand something. What you can do is considered impossible. That's almost certainly part of why your friends freaked out, and it's definitely why this Raphael wants you. You're breaking the laws of physics as well as magic as I understand them when you teleport. Anyone who sees you do it is going to be interested in you. Once you master how your ability works, you will be the most sought person in the world, that you want it or not. So you need to make that happen on your terms, and if nothing else, I can promise you she's a good person to have wanting what you can offer."

Thomas's nod was reflexive. He barely noticed giving it as he assimilated what he'd been told. He didn't know how he felt about being in demand to that level since all it had gotten him at this point was to be chased out of his city, away from his family by people he had believed to be his friends.

Chapter 23

I90, MT, January 18th

The bus was warm.

Just for that, Thomas didn't entirely regret being on it.

Grant had gotten him the ticket. Not stolen, the kangaroo had said, but hadn't elaborated. Thomas had looked for reasons they could stick together, but had found none by the time he'd had to board the bus.

He was alone again.

The screen on the back of the seat before him was playing a news report of something taking place somewhere in Montana. Every screen was on that same channel. That had been something he'd noticed on picking his seat. They could be turned off by syncing his phone to the bus's network and entering his ticket number. He needed the same to change the channel. According to the plaque next to it, they even had a library of movies he could pick from; using his phone. At least he needed to use the provided headset to have sound, so he didn't have to listen to the drone of everything that was going on in the state he was leaving.

Like the bus he took to leave Minnesota, this one was nearly empty, which made the fact the fox picked the seat on the other side of the aisle from Thomas frustrating. He'd sat at the far back counting on no one else wanting to be all the way here and out of every other seat available; the man had to take the one that meant Thomas had no privacy. There went his option to jerk off. Although.

He eyed the fox again. He was watching something on his phone, ignoring the screen, now advertising something to drink. He wasn't bad-looking. In his early forties, so no longer the oldest guy he'd be with. The seatbacks were high, so with only a little crouching, Thomas could be riding his lap.

Fuck. That image reminded him it has been a day now since he'd had sex. The guy didn't have the look of someone married, so he could be open to the chance to—

The scene of the man's outrage at being propositioned followed the thought, then Thomas was being thrown off the bus and the cold he knew was waiting for him there. That put a stop to the fantasy.

And Thomas has a day and a half before reaching Denver.

The man would have to get off the bus eventually, right? Hopefully, before Thomas had to get himself off.

Who was he kidding? That was now.

Without another option, he stood and headed for the restroom. Hopefully, it wouldn't be too cramped.

* * * * *

I90, MT, January 18th

Thomas smiled at the fox as he walked past his seat and kept going. If he couldn't count on the fox moving, Thomas had realized he could be the one changing seat. It wasn't like he didn't have a wide choice of them. And the one he picked didn't have a neighbor to keep him from relieving his tension as needed.

If the fox went and moved too, Thomas would take it as an advance and take advantage of it.

This screen was also on, and Thomas considered looking for a seat with a broken one, but the scene that started playing froze him.

It was the image of a nearly deserted charging station with only a pickup with the tarp nearly pulled off by the strong winds. The clouds were so dark the lights had come on. The door opened and the camera holder stepped aside, showing the clouds, then panning down to bring into view a four person standoff, with a fifth one pushing against the wind toward them.

Thomas didn't remember the wind being so strong he'd had to push against it. His focus had been on reaching Grant.

The him on the screen stopped moving, pulling on his leg. He couldn't see the earth as it climbed up

his leg, from where the marmot holding the phone stood. When it pulled him toward the man with the shovel, although from the screen it looked like no more than a rod planted in the ground, it was easy to see his jerky motion as hopping in his direction, instead of him being dragged there by the earth and trying to remain standing.

Then two of them stepped away from the one they were around and the funnel came down on the one with the shovel. What had felt like a handful of seconds as Thomas experienced it, was over in less than two; the man and the shovel flying away. The camera jerked back on the others, and Thomas was already next to Grant. There was a flash of light intense enough it took a few second for the camera's light compensation to reduce enough the scene could be seen, and only two people remained as the clouds melted away to reveal blue sky and an eager sun.

The scroll at the bottom read *'Government tries, and fails, to prevent broad daylight alien abduction?'* and Thoms grabbed the headset as the image switched to an inside news studio.

"What do you think, Maggie?" the man asked; an aardvark in a pale gray suit.

Maggie was a poodle with her frizzy fur trimmed into multiple neat bobs on her head. "Well, you have to give guy props for production values. It looks like it's recorded on a phone, outside. Those clouds have to be the most real I've seen on any recording. Did you see the way that guy was picked up by the funnel? I'm no meteorological expert, but that looked real to me. The guy posted that yesterday and it already had close to two million views. He can say goodbye to that dead-job, because he's going to be getting offers that will land him into one to make movies any moment now."

"That, or in a padded room," the aardvark countered. "He claims that it's real. That the guy running toward the 'conflict' was just in the store talking with him. A rat. And that after the flash of light, him and the kangaroo are simply gone."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh course he'd claim that when he went to the effort of making it look so real, and okay, I'll give him that the actors are real, the wind can be too. But look at the terrain, it's so uneven that can't be an accident. The flash was added in post, and those two just have to drop down and they're hidden. I mean, sure, that was a freak weather occurrence, but he recorded it then instead of before and he's taking advantage of it. That's another sign he'd a special effect master."

"Or, considering how his claims played a part in getting the video to go viral, he should consider marketing as his new career." The image shifted and only the aardvark was looking at the camera. "We'll have a brief break for our sponsors, but when we come back, we'll be discussing if the sun actually disappeared over Butte last week, or if it's just a case of bad-water caused vision impairment."

Thomas relaxed. At least they weren't taking it seriously.

He wanted his phone so he could look up more information. Was this how every station was reporting it? And any of the others even bothered showing the clip? Would anyone who knew magic was real see it for what it was and come investigate what had happened?

He was surprised those people had left without destroying the evidence. The way Grant had talked about the Chamber, it sounded like killing the clerk wouldn't give them pause. Maybe the marmot had hid once Thomas took Grant away. The video did end with the two people still looking at where they had been.

Would they be back now that he'd revealed what he had recorded? Were they the reason the station wasn't taking it seriously? Should Thomas try to warn the Marmot so he could go to the authorities?

Was there such a thing as the magic police?

If the marmot went to them, what could he tell them about Thomas? Rat with black fur, if the clerk wasn't so aware as to remember not everyone was one solid color. Would he mention Thomas had had his hand in his pants and had been about to give him a blow job? Would that tell the police he was part of the Society?

Thomas decided he wouldn't, since that wasn't appropriate behavior to let happen behind the counter, and if he did... well. As far as Thomas knew. Plenty of guys outside the Society were horny enough to hit on other guys.

That left Grant. His truck was there.

Had the Chamber taken it, hoping it would give them a clue to help locate the kangaroo? Maybe it had been impounded. Grant said it would be monitored, so that had to mean the impound. Which one was best for Grant?

Thomas hoped he'd be okay.

He rubbed his face. Thinking about that didn't do any good. He couldn't help Grant, and worrying about it would just make him a nervous wreck. When he needed was to turn his mind off. The next best thing was to close his eyes so he wouldn't have to look at the screen. And since that meant it was dark, he should try to sleep so the trip wouldn't feel so long.

Instead, his mind showed him the police boarding the bus, grabbing him and cuffing him. Reading him his rights for hitting on a guy for the purpose of powering himself off his sexual energy and the punishment was for him to entirely drained of his cum.

When his mind move to how they were going to drain him, Thomas groaned and opened his eyes. He looked down at his crotch. There were days when he really wished his mind wasn't such a gutter.

He looked around.

At least, now he didn't have a neighbor to stop him from taking care of it.

Chapter 24

Denver, CO, January 19th

Thomas ran inside the library and stop next to a heat vent. How could it be so much colder in Denver than I had been in Bozeman? He'd traveled South.

The dozen blocks from the terminal to the library had left him colder than he walk from his grandfather's to the fast-food joint. If he'd known it would be this cold, he would have spent the few dollars for bus fare.

He let the heat soak in. As he wondered at the lack of a card reader at the entrance.

The lobby was large, with a placard thanking the families whose donations had allowed it to be rebuilt after the 2031 earthquake. One name jumped out at Thomas; Lewiston. Thomas fought the panic. Had they made a mistake? If they were important enough to be among families who'd warrant a thank you plaque, they'd have the kind of pull in the city to...

Grant had said something about them being kicked out, hadn't he? And Jules had mentioned there was tension between this Brislow and the Lewiston as the reason for Thomas to go to Denver to be safe from them. He looked at the date and reminded himself that a lot could happen in twenty years.

He walked among the columns until he found the public computers. Sitting at one, he was surprised not to see a reader for the ID Grant had provided him. There were also fewer people using them than he'd expected. He'd expected the usage to be tracked at least to the level of who accessed what. The library at the UMn did that. It was a safety measure, so they'd know if someone was accessing sites for mental and health issues, or those flagged as being sought by violent students.

The last one had been established in the wake of the epidemic of school shooting at the end of the previous and start of this century; he'd learned in his Studies for Success class. There had been the usual protests and lawsuits, the teacher had said with derision, which hadn't amounted too much before, but then, the government had taken the side of the children instead of silently supporting the gun owners by not doing anything. They'd then added, still smirking, that the crackdown on police armament and violence might have had something to do with the change in policies.

The computer asked for a name to log him in, along with a date of birth and a phone number. Only the name was mandatory, and without a scanner to prove the name was his real one, he entered Thomas Heeran. Paul wouldn't mind him borrowing his last name.

The next page was a list of public message centers, along with instruction to access an existing account via an anonymous portal.

Wondering why that was there, he discretely looked around and realized the few people at the computers weren't the best dressed ones, and had bags at their feet. How many of the homeless had IDs. Thomas realized why those weren't required.

A lion with mangy fur caught him looked and Thomas snapped to his screen. He thought about checking his message center or using an anonymous one to check in with his family. They could tell him how they were doing, and he could tell them he was... what? On the run with no idea what he was doing?

And that was ignoring that his family might be held against their will.

It was easier not to know how he'd react to the knowledge of what him running off had caused to happen to his family. So long as it was just his imagination, he could dismiss it as such.

He hoped to God they were okay.

Huh.

Could he pray? Grant said his ability came from a god; from Thomas's god. That He was real. Didn't that imply he could hear prayers? Did He answer them?

I don't know if you hear this, he thought, pushing them out to the... where ever gods hung out, *but please keep my family safe*. He hesitated. Amen.

He fought against looking around to see if anyone had noticed what he did. Which was a weird thing to feel like doing, he realized, since it had all been in his head.

He'd done what he could for his family, so he set on the search for this Denton Brislow.

* * * * *

Denver, CO, January 19th

Thomas walked up to the house with the thought that this couldn't be it. It was nice enough, and the front yard would probably be just as nice if it wasn't under two and a half feet of snow. But it had nothing that said 'we're rich' to it, and Grant had said everyone in the Society was rich. This looked more like his parent's house, with the large front yard here being replaced by a giant backyard.

This said 'we're comfortable upper middle-class'.

There weren't a lot of Brislovs in Denver, and no one listed by the name of Denton or even D. The couple living here had caught his attention over the few others, because as part of looking for clues online as to which was related to Denton, he'd come across a news article of their house burning down.

That had happened right around the time the Lewistons had left the city. The family had been big enough in the city that their departure had made the news. It also talked about the death the family had endured over the previous year, with that an Alistair Lewiston going into the most detail as he was a man who'd made his mark on the city with all his charity.

The fire had taken place a few months before, so it might just be a coincidence. But it was the only time the name Brislow was mentioned in anything resembling what could be a conflict between the two families.

If he had the kind of money Grant implied the Society had, Thomas knew he'd, at the very least, do everything he could to get those behind burning his parent's house down out of the city.

He looked at the house again. He'd also buy them something better.

He made it onto the porch before indecision struck. What was he going to say? Ask to speak to their son, Denton? At least he'd know if he had the wrong house, but what if they thought he was Lewiston? They might lie to him and...

He pressed the bell.

He could find out anything out here and talking himself out of asking.

The door opened and a bull old enough to be his grandfather looked down at him. "Yes?"

"Hi," Thomas said, his mind racing. He had the wrong house, no doubt about that now. Why hadn't there been a picture of the owner in the article about the fire? Why hadn't he thought to look for one? "I'm... Tom. I'm looking for... I mean. Do you have a—" he ran a hand over his face. Just turn around and leave.

"Who is it, Stanley?" a woman called from deeper into the house.

The bull, Stanley, was studying Thomas and rooting him in place.

Just say you made a mistake and turn around.

"Well?" the woman asked, sounding closer. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," Stanley answered, and Thomas swallowed at the severity of it.

"Then don't just stand there." The woman moved him out of the way. She smiled at Thomas, looking him over. Like Stanley, she was old enough to be his grandmother. "Hello there. Are you lost?" she looked around before motioning. "Come on in."

"Aileen," Stanley said with mild exasperation, "you can't just invite a stranger in the house."

"He's just a kid, Stanley," the cow replied, showing him to the side. "He's probably freezing to death the way you leaving the door open like this is taking all the heat out of the house." She took Thomas's arm and pulled him inside. The promise of heat made him melt. "I'll have a cup of tea ready in no time, and it's going to do you good on a day like this."

They walked past a wall of pictures.

Younger versions of the two bovines, one a wedding picture, another of them holding a baby, then another baby and toddler. Another was of a different bull, probably the son, with cow and three children at their feet. One of Stanley and his son, taking at a party where two were laughing. Another of Aileen and their son's wife, playing with the grandchildren.

There was a sense of love in those pictures, but the lack of a picture where everyone was there made Thomas feel like they weren't close.

The kitchen where she sat him was smaller than his mother's large one, which doubled as her studio for her online cooking episodes. It had the sense of a farm-house kitchen, with the clear coated cabinet doors and large clay jars that would hold flour, sugar, salt and a variety of other baking ingredients.

Then she had a large tea cup before him, along with a porcelain container filled with sugar cubes and one for milk. After a sip, he added a couple of cubes and some milk. Tea wasn't as good as coffee without

additives, he decided, although the heat it spread through him made it delicious.

She sat across from him. "Now, how about you tell me what has you outside and knocking at our door on a day like this?" she asked as Stanley took a seat at the table between them.

"I'm looking for someone," he said. He could just leave. He knew he had the wrong house, but while he talked, he could enjoy the heat. "I got in trouble, and I don't know where to find the person who can get me out of it."

"What sort of trouble?" the bull asked, his tone just this side of being a threat.

"Stanley," Aileen chided. "Don't scare the boy."

He stood. "I should go. This isn't where—"

"Sit down," she said in a firm, motherly tone that Thomas obeyed before realizing he'd done so. "Tell us what the trouble is. Kids your age blow things out of proportion. I'm sure once you tell us you'll realize it's nothing really, but if it is, I promise me and Stanley will help as best we can."

The bull grumbled something unintelligible as Thomas took the cup in his hands and sipped it. He wished he was blowing this out of proportion. He'd take being made to feel like an idiot over what he was going through. And it wasn't like he could tell them anything. They'd think he was insane.

Well, he could tell them some things, the generalities of what had happened.

"I met some people in college," he started with, looking at his cup, "and I thought they were good guys, but then I did something and they freaked out about it. My family sent me to my grandfather's while things cooled down, but then they sent some men to find me on the bus. I got away from them and found a ride, only for them to find me again, only now they're ranting about some Raphael Lewiston, and then they—"

Aileen's gasp stopped Thomas, and he looked up.

"Who did you say?" Stanley all but growled, standing slowly as Thomas took in the fear in her eyes. Then the bull's size and that he was leaning in, his muzzle in a snarl had Thomas out of there so fast the only reason he knew he hadn't teleported out of the house was that he was still running when he realized he was in the cold.

* * * * *

Denver, CO, January 19th

Thomas huddled on the other side of the road to a modern looking two story building. Through the glass doors and wall he could see the lobby, where muscular men and women moved about. Some wore black and gray body armor.

Thomas had finally found Denton Brislow.

He'd gone back to the library from the disaster that his meeting with the older couple had turned into and went back to his search. The name had come up when he put the name in a general search instead of only searching through the Denver directory. He came on in a financial article, of all places, about up-and-coming businesses and the people who started them. The article was a few years old, but it informed Thomas that Denton Brislow was the CEO of a private security company called Steel Link. And the picture that went along with the article showed that he was a cheetah, so now he was sure he had the right one.

Unfortunately, the article didn't say where he lived, and as the CEO of a successful company, it explained why Thomas couldn't find his address in the directory.

Steel Link, on the other hand, turned out to be easy to find, and here he was looking at men that would make Madoc drool with lust, women, who could hold their own against a lot of the guys Thomas knew, even—was that a man in underwear that had just run through the lobby? And had that bear really been that hot?

He was moving, thinking he could go in and get a second look at him, maybe help him out of those underwear, before he could stop, then the promise of heat on the other side of those doors, even if there was no body contact involved, kept him going.

How did anyone tolerate this cold? Thomas couldn't be paid enough to live here.

The entryway was a claustrophobic airlock, even if both sets of doors were glass. He passed the emergence stair exit, that door was metal. As he pushed the door in, hot air blasted past him and noise erupted. He stop as it closed, taking in the volume, and how none of it had made it through the glass door.

Everyone was in motion, running and walking, but even those who stood still, talking, had a sense of energy to them, as if they were just pausing before exploding in motion too.

The front desk was to the left, stretch along two third of the wall and had two receptionists. The one closes to him was a black and white rabbit talking with an otter in body armor. The one further back was a

corker spaniel, with her back to him, but not busy with anyone.

Thomas took a step in her direction, trying to formulate his need to speak to the owner and not be—

“Lewiston!” someone yelled on the other side of the room, the name distorted by a thick Russian accent. “Mikael not work with Samson, Samson pig!” The yeller was a giant otter dressed in the same black and gray body armor as the one at the counter, but on his massive frame it seemed to be stretched to its limit.

Fuck, the guy might out muscle Chima.

“I know what he is, Yakovich!” The reply came from an office’s open door and Thomas fought his panic. Lewiston had to be common enough as a name; this had to be a coincidence. He had no reason to assume that—

A rat stepped out of the office. “He’s also one of our best drivers,” he said. “And since you and your wife want the best, you have to deal with him.”

Thomas backed away. Now he understood why Jules had said Denton was a bad idea.

“You asshole,” the otter replied as he turned.

“Tell your wife to fuck you for me!” the rat snapped back.

He had to get out before the rat turned and—

The rat was looking straight at Thomas.

This time, Thomas knew he didn’t teleport because he nearly wrenched his arm out of its socket as he pulled on the door’s handle and it didn’t open. He had an instant of comedic fear that he should push instead of pull, but no, that didn’t work either.

He was trapped.

He looked around for another way out. The rat was no where insight, but the corker spaniel was looking at him now.

No, he wasn’t trapped. The smile he gave her wasn’t pleasant. They just thought he was. He looked at the other side of the street through two sets of glass doors, and there he was.

He didn’t stay there to see their surprised expression. He looked to blocks ahead, and he was in the deserted intersection. He looked to his left, and he was next to an empty bus stop. Again and he was before convenience store.

Now he settled for running, cursing his bad luck.

What the fuck was he supposed to do now?

Chapter 25

Denver, CO, January 19th

Thomas stared at the screen as the announcement that the library was closing sounded.

He didn't move.

He had a few minutes before anyone did the rounds to ensure everyone had left, and he wanted to stay in the warmth for as long as he could get away with it. Just the idea of stepping outside had him shivering.

Where the fuck was he expected to sleep? It wasn't like he could burn the little money he had on a hotel, even a motel.

Why was there a Lewiston at Steel Link? And one in a position of authority, from the way he'd talked to that giant of an otter. Authority had to mean there was an understanding between the two families. You didn't put someone you didn't trust in that kind of position.

Had they reconciled?

Couldn't they have waited until Thomas didn't need help anymore?

It wasn't a coincidence, of that, Thomas was certain of. He didn't believe in them anymore. Maybe the reconciliation was even because of him. Madoc had sounded like that Raphael was adamant about getting Thomas.

And couldn't Grant's phone have lasted long enough for Jules to tell him who Thomas was expected to meet for help?

Okay, so that meant he needed to make his way to San Francisco because the backup plan was definitely in effect now.

The bus was out; because the cheapest ticket was twice what he had. The weather made walking or hitchhiking highly problematic. If he had any idea how he'd teleported himself and Grant to the grotto from Wyoming, he'd do that, but that would leave him with the problem of not having someone to fuck him in San Francisco and dying. Grant had been clear about that. Thomas had nearly died from teleporting them, and fucking him was how he's survived.

Yay for being powered by sex.

Maybe he could teleport onto a bus going to San Francisco? It wasn't like there would be many people on it. But the windows on the bus he'd taken had been tinted, and, as far as he remembered, so had all those he'd walked by leaving the terminal. Even if he found one without tinted windows, all he'd be able to see was the ceiling, and that meant a drop on appearing and attracting the attention of anyone in it, or landing on someone. He wouldn't be able to tell where anyone was.

Maybe hang out at a charging station south of the city and hope to come across a good samaritan?

Wasn't that relying a little too much on luck? And wasn't luck just another word for coincidence, in which he no longer believed?

Someone cleared her through.

The older board who had walked by the public computers every half hour was looking at him.

"Just a minute," he said, eyes fixed on the screen, but mind skidding around for a solution.

"We are closing, young man," she said in a calm voice.,

"I just—"

"We are closing." The tone of her voice now had a hint of motherly finality added to the calmness.

"Fine," Thomas mumbled, shouldering his backpack. Had the cold weather caused compassion to shrivel into nothingness?

He tightened his overcoat as he stepped outside, which did little against the cold.

It was dark.

Of course, it was dark. It was January, and he'd stayed inside until they closed. He was frozen before the end of the block and stepped into the convenience store for the heat. The smell of cooking food from the deli corner reminded him he hadn't eaten anything all day. The prices on the display told him he'd continue going hungry.

Lodging was a better use of his money right now. Not that he wanted to spend it on even that. His best course of action was to come up with a way to make some money and pay for a bus ticket. That would be

easier if he didn't squander the little he had.

He stepped to the window and gazed outside.

Could he perform sex for money?

He snorted. He had the performing part down without a problem. But how did he go about offering himself to strangers and asking to be paid? It was called the oldest industry in the world, not the easiest to get into.

He noticed he stood next to a display of packaged dried sausages. Before his mind could go into the gutter, his stomach rumbled.

He was right here, looking outside. If he grabbed a handful and teleported, the clerk wouldn't be able to do anything, but the camera would... nope. That was pointed at the alcohol fridge.

So he could—

Was the clerk eyeing him intently? Maybe he was checking Thomas out? Right, because that was how his luck ran these days.

He left as casually as he could.

Did stores like this one call each other to report suspicious people? If one of them caught him teleporting on camera, how long until the government was after him, too?

What was he thinking? If he was going to risk being hunted down by the government, it shouldn't be over stealing a handful of dried meat sticks. No, he had to go big or go home.

He was looking around for... a bank, he realized, when what he was considering hit him.

Rob a bank?

What the fuck was wrong with him?

Taking from his grandfather was more borrowing than stealing. Sure, he hadn't asked, and he hadn't left an IOU, but once he explained, Magnus would understand.

A bank?

What were the odds that once all of this was done and he returned the money, because he would, they'd understand and forgive him?

Did he think he was in some family movie?

He'd heard the line about power corrupting, but he'd always thought it was a plot device. Now here he was, contemplating robbing a bank after what? Not even a week on his own? Half that with some level of handle on his teleportation.

And he was forgetting the biggest problem with his plan. He's only teleported where he could see, and when he managed a place that was far, he'd needed to be fuck for a recharge.

Fuck. Why hadn't he searched for bathhouses when he had access to a computer? How was he going to recharge? Grant had told him he needed the sex. He looked at the other pedestrians. Would one of them point him in the right direction if he asked?

He was so not cut out for this.

He found a nook out of the building wind and huddled.

He couldn't do this. He had no idea where to sleep so he wouldn't freeze, no idea where he could get food, or sex. It had all been Grant. Thomas sucked at surviving on his own.

The wind shifted and got under the overcoat, causing his teeth to chatter audibly. That did it. He was using the money he had for a motel room and in the morning he was messaging his parents so they could arrange to get him home. If someone watched that, then they were welcome to take him. Right now, he'd rather deal with this Raphael than be out here, lost and miserable.

It wasn't a great plan—were plans to surrender ever great—but it was a plan. Knowing what he intended to do made him feel better and that let him push out of the nook and brave the cold.

The first thing to take care of was food, but he couldn't spend too much on that until he knew how much a motel room cost. He could hit a fast-food place and go for their cheap menu... but would he be able to resist adding anything to that? That was the point of them, after all, getting him in there for the cheap stuff and getting him to spend more on everything else around it.

He spotted the food truck under the street lamp and noticed the lineup. Were food trucks cheap? The line-up would indicate it was good, wouldn't it? But it also meant higher demand, which would result in higher prices.

His stomach grumbled a protest at the procrastination. It wouldn't cost him anything to see what the prices were. If they weren't reasonable, he'd only be in the position he was right now.

The food advertised was Polish, and the prices were more reasonable than he'd expected, so he got into

the line, taking his backpack off and holding it before him. He didn't protest when people huddled around him as that meant more heat, but he kept a hand on the overcoat's pocket where he kept his wallet.

He could see the pictures on the side of the truck when was shoved hard enough he ended up on his ass.

"Asshole!" he yelled at the runner and regretted the outburst. He got to his feet, pick up the backpack, and put his hand back on the pocket... which no longer had the bulge his wallet had caused. He put his hand in the pocket to check, then he was looking at the runner in the distance, his heart sinking and then rising with his anger.

"Son of a bitch!"

He took off after him, putting the pack on.

He literally couldn't afford to be robbed.

The thief had distance over Thomas, but Thomas has one advantage, and it was a good one. As soon as he stepped out of the light of a post, he teleported three ahead. This would be simple, since the sidewalk was deserted. He did it again, and once more, as the thief, still a block away, turned between buildings.

Thomas teleported the distance and nearly slipped off his feet as he tried to do the ninety-degree turn.

That had let the thief put distance between them in the alley, but that was easy to fix. Thomas threw himself in the thief's direction and teleported.

What had Grant said about trying something new under combat situations?

Right.

Bad idea.

Thomas appeared high and only clipped the thief's shoulder before crashing down hard. He pushed himself up despite the screaming pain in his shoulder.

"That's my wallet," he said through gritted teeth. "Give it back." All Thomas could tell about the thief, with it being so dark, was that he was lanky.

"Fraid you're mistaken, mate."

"I've had a really bad couple of days," Thomas growled. "You really don't want to piss me off?"

"Is that so?" The thief sounded so cocky Thomas needed to put him in his place. "Fraid your day ain't gonna get any better, mate."

The punch hit blindsided Thomas as he was about to throw himself at the thief, and he was on the ground again, this time with his head ringing. He pushed himself to all four, but something hit him in the stomach and he no longer had the strength to move.

"Don't bother," the thief said as someone pulled on his overcoat. "Just take the pack." Hands rummaged through his pockets. "You shoulda left it. The night woulda've gone better, mate. But I'ma gonna be nice and leave you this expensive-looking overcoat. Wouldn't want to be responsible for you freezing to death, would I? Enjoy Denver, mate."

Thomas tried to curse them. Yell, order them to return their things. He even tried to stand, but all he got out of that was his consciousness leaving him too.

* * * * *

Denver, CO, January 19th

Thomas woke to a hand on his neck and he shoved the thief away with a yell, then groaned in pain as his stomach protested the motion.

"Careful there, friend," the thief said.

"I'm not your friend," Thomas snapped and glared... it wasn't the thief. He was too wide. He didn't think the other one, the burly one, would bother talking. "Sorry."

"I'm sorry I didn't get here in time to give those two something to remember me by." The man shook a cloth-covered fist in the direction the thief and his accomplice had left. Thomas realized that some of his man's mass was because he wore many jackets one over the other.

"You saw?" Maybe he knew them and could help him get his stuff back.

"I was rounding the corner as they left you." The man searched through the snow and smiled as he picked up something.

"No." No-no-no. The thief had gone through his pockets. Thomas reached in, hoping they'd missed the envelope. It wasn't there. His backup plan was gone.

"What's wrong?" the man asked and Thomas crawled away on seeing the stone he held. He looked at what he was holding. "Oh, that's for that bump on the side of your head. The cold's going to reduce the

swelling. Winter's good about providing cold things, you know."

Thomas took it. The stone was smooth, its sides rounded and the size of a flattened egg. It was cold enough that it stung through his fur before soothing the pain.

"I'm Donal," the man said, offering his hand. "Donal Hines. Now. What's wrong?"

Thomas shook a hand that had to be covered by three pairs of gloves. "Thomas. I'd need all night to tell you."

"Then how about you keep it to that wail?" He pulled a thermos from within one of the pile layers.

"That's just the last straw on an already broken back," Thomas sighed. "I had an envelope with vital information on it."

"Oh, right!" Donal handed him the thermos. "Serve yourself. It's tea. I hope you like tea. I can't stand coffee." He searched through the layers.

Thomas unscrewed the cap.

Except for being outside, instead of a truck, this felt eerily familiar. He paused before pouring tea into the cap. "I can't pay you back for this."

"No surprise there," Donal replied. "There you are. I swear I'd put you in the other pocket." He offered Thomas an envelope. "That's why I was running after you. It's quite the pair of legs you have on you."

Thomas stared in disbelief. In the near-total dark, it looked suspiciously like the one Grant had given him.

His backup plan.

"Where did you get that?" he asked cautiously.

"It fell out of your coat when you ran by me."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "And you chased me to return it?"

Donal shrugged. "Call it doing a good turn ahead. Maybe, in spite of what just happened to you, my kind act will make it more likely you'll help someone in need when you come across them. It's a harsh world we live in. I try to smooth its edges when I can."

Thomas put the cap on the thermos and took the envelope. What he'd described sounded a lot like he thought of himself as a good Samaritan. "Thank you. You don't know what this means to me."

"I'm just glad I could help." He took the thermos and filled the cap as Thomas put the envelope away.

Thomas took the offered cap and the heat radiating from it, as he held it in both hands, was almost painful.

"Do you have someplace to go?"

Home, he wanted to say, but now, he wasn't sure he'd even make it the night. He shook his head.

"That's what I thought," Donal said with a nod. "You have the look of the lost on you. How about I help you some more?"

Thomas finished the slow swallow he'd started, then looked at Donal over the cap. "You brought me back my envelope, and now you're going to help me again?" He couldn't help the bitterness that followed. "That's awfully convenient."

Donal laughed. "Convenient would be some sugar daddy stopping at the end of the alley and offering to take care of you for the rest of your life in exchange for a piece of that sweet as of yours." He looked up and peered down the alleyway. Thomas hesitated, then cautiously looked over his shoulder.

"Nope," the man said. "Not showing up. Think of me as the next best thing. What I have going for me is that I know these streets and alleys and, more importantly, I know where the warm places are. What do you say?"

Thomas took another long swallow of tea. "You aren't going to make it conditional on getting some of my ass?"

Donal smiled. "I'm not in the habit of making my help conditional on anything."

Thomas handed him the empty cap. "What if I ask really nicely?"

The man stared at him, then burst out laughing.

Chapter 26

Denver, CO, January 20th

Thomas discovered that warm was relative.

The abandoned building Donal let him to certainly wasn't as cold as outside, but it wasn't what Thomas considered anything resembling warmth. Donal spread newspapers on the floor for him to sleep on and got him old blankets to pile on top of him. Donal was explaining the dangers of sleeping directly on a cold floor then, Thomas was waking up to faint light and movement.

It took a full minute before it registered the light was sunlight, and that it was Donal moving about. He stared at the rodent face covered with red-brown fur. Then Donal had him up, and they were out in the cold again. Ahead, he was informed, of the guards who checked the building for squatters.

Fully awake by the time they joined a line of more people dress similarly to Donal, Thomas looked the man over, trying to figure out what was off about him.

"You checking me out?" Donal asked, grinning.

"No," Thomas protested, blushing, and realized what it was. "Where's your tail?" he was almost certain of Donal's species now. "You are a squirrel, right?"

Donal patted his stomach. "Did you think I was really this rotund? It's good insulation."

The line lead to the back of a minivan, instead of a food truck, and the lemmin handing out coffee from it was dressed for the cold.

"Thank you kindly, Mirabel," Donal said, taking the paper cup. Thomas noticed she had filled it from a different container than she was filling the others.

"I'm just glad to see you made it another night." She handed Thomas a cup. "Who's your friend? I haven't seen him before."

"He's new," Donal replied before Thomas could come up with an answer. "It's early to be handing out his name."

She nodded. "I'm Mirabel. I'm here every Thursday morning with coffee," she smiled at Donal, "and the alternate."

The squirrel snorted before sipping his cup.

"If I'm here next week," Thomas said, letting her heat soak into his fingers. "I'll tell it to you."

She studied him, her expression growing serious. "Then I hope you've gotten yourself back where you belong before then."

Donal pulled Thomas away. "She's a bit nosy, but she's harmless." He took another sip.

"What's the alternate?" Thomas asked, sipping his cup. The coffee was on the bitter side.

"Tea. She makes a point of learning what each of us prefers, and unless it's alcohol, she'll make sure she had some on hand. But if I get here late and she's out, I'll drink what she has left." He looked at the rat. "Yes, even the horrible stuff the rest of the world's addicted to."

"It's not bad."

"It's coffee." The shudder and the tone made it clear Donal didn't think that was many drinks worse than that. "So long as you trust where it's coming from, never refuse food or drink. Those are hard enough to come by at the best of time."

He led Thomas to a vent not entirely covered with people huddled into two distinct groups. On one side were well-dressed men and women purposely looking ahead, not even glancing toward the other group. The one he and Donal joined. The one Thomas was now part of.

Warm air blew up from the vent and counteracted a little of the cold.

"She is right about one thing. If you can go back where you belong, you should. This isn't a life you want if there's an alternative available." Donal looked at him expectantly.

In the daylight, after someone sleeping, and with caffeine in him, the idea of turning himself over so that Raphael fellow could get him didn't sound as appealing. But did he have an alternative?

"Is it possible to earn money in this situation?" Thomas motioned to the two of them and the others on this side of the vent. A few gave him the evil eye as a result, but he was mostly ignored.

"You're not going to earn a living," the squirrel said with finality, then seemed to think better of it.

“But, with the right skill set, and not being too particular about who you work for, you can get a dollar here and there.” He was watching Thomas again.

Did teleporting qualify a one of those skill sets? He decided that wasn't something he'd mention. Donal had earned his trust somewhat by helping him, but nowhere near enough for that reveal.

“I have...” he wouldn't know unless he told him. “I need to get to San Francisco. That's where the person who can help me is.”

Donal nodded. “Can you call them so they can come pick you up?”

Thomas shook his head. That would be in the envelope, but Grant has sounded too serious when he warned against looking in it early for Thomas to ignore him. “I don't have their number.”

“Can you call your parents?” he immediately asked, and Thomas shook his head. “Are you running away from them?” he pressed.

“No,” Thomas replied, offended he'd do something like that, but closed his mouth on the explanation when he noted the looks he'd attracted from both groups. “It's more complicated.”

Donal nodded after thinking. “The camel's already broken back.” He finished his cup, crumpled it, and put it in a pocket before walking away. “Let's go see about breakfast.”

Thomas followed, finishing his coffee. “You kept your cup, should I?”

“Only if you can think of something to do with it. This isn't a life you want to burden yourself with things you can't use. With a bit of care, attention and ingenuity, you can get by.”

Thomas threw it in the first trashcan he saw.

“Now that there's no one listening,” the squirrel said, “are you willing to give me details? I'm not asking for the whole story, just what you're comfortable telling me.”

“I meant some people in college,” Thomas started, feeling like what he'd told the Brislow couple had been a rehearsal for this moment. “They weren't the good guys I thought they were, and I got on their bad side when I did... something that freaked them out. My dad put me on a bus to my grandfather's, but they had people at one of the stops there to bring me back, and they've been chasing me up and down a quarter of the country at this point, and my dad was the only one who knew, so my parents have to be watched.”

“If San Francisco was family, you'd have their number,” Donal mused, turning into an alley. Thomas hesitated, then was following again and after another turn he smelled food, mixed with the smell of garbage.

“Look,” The squirrel said. “He's my advice as someone who's been here for a while. You're better off going home. No matter how bad that might be, this is a hell of a lot worse.” He picked something off the ground. “The street is not a place you want to live.”

He turned the item in his hand. Thomas thought he was feeling it without looking.

“But,” Donal took something from a pocket, “if you insist on doing this, you need to know that it's going to be nearly impossible for you to accumulate money.” He stepped between a dumpster and a wall, which cut the wind. “I don't know how much you're going to need to get to San Francisco, but it's not going to be easy.” Now he was working on what he'd taken from the pocket with what'd he'd picked up.

Thomas couldn't make out what either item were, and all thought of them left as the wind shifted and he nearly throw up from the stench.

“Please tell me we aren't going to go dumpster diving.”

“Too good for that, are you?” Donal took a glove off to work with the two items and now Thomas made out one was a button that the squirrel seemed to be attempting to wedge into a mass of other small items.

Thomas steeled his resolve. “I will if I have to.” He did his best not to think of it as his stomach already protested.

“It might get to that,” Donal replied, then smiled, not looking up from his work. “But not this morning. The breakfast crowd will be thinning any moment and the leftovers are going to be thrown out. Those will be on top, no diving needed.”

When the door opened a few minutes later, Donal put away the items. The button seemed to be secured among a toy car and a strip of metal. The whole thing seemed to be no longer than Donal's hand. He had his glove back on by the time the top of the dumpster was lifted and fell down. As soon as the door closed, the squirrel was halfway over the side and came back with a garbage bag.

He hefted something like looked to hold enough to feed four. “You want to eat hear, so someplace more appropriate?”

“How about somewhere the smell isn't murdering my appetite?”

Donal looked at the dumpster and sniffed. He seemed surprised at the smell, then led Thomas to

another alley.

* * * * *

Denver, CO, January 27th

The following days were rough, and the nights rougher.

Donal brought Thomas along to his job; doing the books for someone who didn't use computers to do their accounting. Thomas didn't need the warning not to ask why. The look of the men and woman in the building was enough to tell him nothing good would happen to him if he was nosy.

After Donal mentioned Thomas could do manual labor, he was put to work moving crate with others, who looked to be in a worse situation than he was.

The day earned five dollars, and Donal pulled him away before Thomas could complain about fair wages. Then the squirrel was giving him an earful about not pissing off the wrong people, and suggested he call his parents.

Thomas shoved the money in his pocket and shook his head.

No two nights were in the same buildings, usually abandoned, and with variable level of warmth. There were nights Thomas wasn't entirely certain Donal knew what building they'd sleep in until they got to it. The squirrel had told him stories of having to fight for sleeping spots in his early days, but that in time he'd developed sixth sense for where the less frequented places were.

The ziplock bag Donal had given him to put his phone in contained his backup plan.

The squirrel had been baffled when Thomas told him he didn't have one, he'd shown him the old and battered one he had, and over the following days, Thomas had watched him use it to line up small jobs for the two of them. Donal put buying time cards for his phone, just under making sure he was fed on his list of survival tips.

Thomas now had a backpack, which had cost him three days' work at the warehouse where Donal had done the books. They only needed him once every few weeks, but they needed labor every day. Thomas had almost decided against buying it, since money spent on items was money he didn't have toward going to San Francisco, but by then he'd been carrying the thermos he'd found as part of a dumpster dive for two days and had almost had it stolen the day before. The back pack was cheaper than getting a dozen coats, like Donal had, to used to store things in.

Not that Thomas knew how the squirrel managed that.

The first evening he had to resort to dumpster diving, he considered going home. That day had already been bad, with all the places Donal had shown him for food already occupied by someone ready to defend their spot. He's tried the shelters, but they were out of food by then. And after wading through the trash for nearly half an hour, the only things that qualified as edible under some very loose definition of the word, he couldn't get himself to eat.

Hunger was a bad wake-up call to fall asleep to.

* * * * *

Denver, CO, February 3rd

Thomas hugged himself by the restaurant door, doing his best to soak the heat radiating from it. Steps crunched the dirty snow of the alley and Thomas sighed. In the twenty minutes he'd been here, waiting for the lunch crowd left over to be thrown out, he'd had to chase someone away twice. He didn't have Donal's knack for locating the restaurant no one else seemed to think of.

He'd tried to be nice, the first time someone had intruded on his spot what... two weeks ago? And had been hit over the head for it, and only managed to keep his back pack because it had been over his shoulder and he was too massive to be turned over even was dazed.

He squared his shoulders and wished he had extra jackets to make his bulk more imposing. The one extra jacket he had been able to afford had wiped him out, at eight dollars. He couldn't wait for spring to arrive. He wouldn't have to worry about spending money trying to stay warm, and he'd be able to walk to San Francisco.

He stepped around the dumpster, gloved hands in fists and froze on seeing the monkey in the Thousand-dollar winter overcoat, and the otter next to him in one that would be worth at least five times that not to be overdone.

"I told you he'd be here," Limbani yelled victorious, pointing at Thomas.

He thought about fighting, about protecting his spot.

He thought about it for five seconds, during which time Felix pulled out his phone with an annoyed look on his face, then Thomas was running.

What were they doing here? No, how? He didn't care about the monkey and his visions. How the fuck had they known he was in that alley? It had been basically luck he'd found the spot.

The alley opened onto an unused parking lot. Snow blocked the street entrance, looked to have been piled on there over and over by snowplow clearing the street. The two pedestrian exits had been kept clear and Thomas ran for one of them and immediately wondered about his choice. As pissed as he was had being found, it was a reminder Limbani knew stuff.

Thomas skidded to a stop.

In their last successful ambush, the monkey had positioned the others to block Thomas' exit and only Grant's surprised arrival had let him escape. Fuck. How was he going to rejoin Donal if he shook off his frat brother?

Felix exited the alley Thomas had come from and Thomas stopped himself about to run again.

Fuck running.

He teleported three feet in front of the otter and clothe-lined him. With Felix gasping for breath, Thomas located the monkey deeper in the alley, running in his direction. He teleported again, intent on pulling the same trick, but Limbani limboed his way under the arm. Right, the monkey was limber. Thomas turned, saw the cloth bag in the monkey's hand, the monkey glancing over the rat's shoulder.

Thomas was on the other side of the parking lot, turning in time to see Yating fight to remain standing as he overbalanced right behind where Thomas had been. He was behind the red panda and brought his fished down as hard as he could on the back of his head.

And he was the one off balance as his fist passed through the panda, and then he was on the ground. He looked to the side as he fell.

"Thomas," Limbani said, "this isn't—"

Thomas finished his fall next to the monkey, a foot higher than he'd been, and his fist coming down. He looked away and finished his fall in a snowbank with his hand radiating pain. The monkey was down too, but Felix was getting up.

Not today.

Thomas was lying next to the otter and kicked him in the side. It didn't have as much strength as he'd hoped, but it was enough to take him down and get Thomas sliding away.

"Sniped again." Thomas came to a stop at the feet of a smiling Yating.

Thomas was over the panda, dropping, elbow first, then through him again. He landed on the other side of the lot again with a curse as pain resonated up his arm. He got to his feet with the promise he was not trying that again against someone who could turn into a ghost.

What did it say about the fuck show his life had turned into that the statement didn't sound utterly ridiculous to him?

He ran at the still grinning panda, cut the distance with the teleport and went through, instead of impacting, the panda. Something caught his overcoat, pulling his feet out from under him, and he fell in the snow away.

Fuck, that was cold without it as protection.

Fuck this. Thomas was fucking done playing around. First thing he had to do was disarm them.

He appeared next to Limbani, fist raised, and as the monkey moved to avoid being hit, Thomas yanked the bag out of his hand and teleported away.

Was Yating like him that he needed to see to use his power? That made no sense, even to him, but hey, magic, so who fucking knew. If he couldn't see a hit coming, so couldn't avoid it, right?

Felix was still on the ground, holding his side so Thomas aimed to grab his bag, appearing next to him to someone clearing his throat. Looking up as his fingers closed on the bag, Thomas saw Donal, held by Gilbert.

"I'm sorry," the squirrel said, "seems I'm too late again."

Then, Thomas saw the grenade the armadillo pressed to Donal's chest.

Chapter 27

Denver, CO, February 3rd

“Are you fucking insane?” Thomas and Yating yelled in unison at the armadillo holding the grenade.

“You’re calling me insane?” Gilbert demanded, “after his friend fried my van?”

“I’ve never seen you before,” Donal said.

“Not you, the kangaroo.” He looked around, searching. “I am so done with this shit. Thomas, you’re coming with us so put that hood over your head or else I’m—”

“Gilbert,” Olavo said, tone severe. “Ease up on the threats.”

“You want him to vanish on us again?” Gilbert snapped.

Thomas watched the exchange, his confusion shifting. He knew Gilbert liked his explosives a little too much, but threatening all of them with a grenade? “Will you shut up?” he yelled before Olavo could reply. “What the fuck is wrong with the lot of you? Okay, I get now that teleportation is a big deal. I’m sorry I freaked out when you all freaked out over it, but this? This chasing me around the country because some guy tells you to? We’re all friends,” Thomas glanced at Felix, who was glaring at him. “We’re frat brothers. Doesn’t that’s supposed to mean something to you?”

“Don’t,” Olavo ordered Gilbert as he opened his mouth. Once the armadillo closed it, the capybara turned to face Thomas. “We will protect our brothers. That is one of the things Sigma Theta Gamma stands for, Thomas. But we can’t go against your family, not after you betrayed them the way you did. That is why we had to come after you and bring—”

“My family?” Thomas demanded, trying to make sense of this. “It was my father’s idea for me to leave the city. You guys are the ones holding them against their will, am I right? That’s how you knew I was on that bus.”

“Bus?” Olavo asked sounding confused. “You father?” He looked at the monkey, who shrugged.

“Don’t look at me,” Limbani said. “I never saw a bus.”

Thomas looked at them, and each one had confusion on their face, even Felix didn’t seem to understand what Thomas had said. Donal was confused too, but Thomas figured that with him, it was due to the entire situation.

“Okay,” Thomas said, speaking slowly to keep his temper under control and give himself time to think. “Here’s my side of what happened. After I ran from the frat, I went to my parents. They figured it was safer for me to be head to Bozeman until they worked out what happened, but then those guys showed up at the bus stop near Fargo, and you guys have been showing up at the worse time after that. And then, Madoc is spouting something about some Raphael guy who—where’s Madoc?” Thomas asked, the other rat’s absence only now registering. “Why isn’t it him who’s spouting nonsense about betrayal, instead of you, Olavo?”

The silence that followed quickly turn uncomfortable. For them, Thomas noticed, unsure if he should be amused about how they seem to be the ones caught with their pants down.

Wrong analogy, Thomas. Pants down is kind of the norm for them.

“Don’t you all speak up at once.”

“He’s been kidnapped,” Gilbert snapped, stepping forward and keeping the squirrel before him. “That’s why we’re trying to get you.” He froze. “I mean now, this time, not—” he looked uncomfortable, and looked to the others for help. Olavo raised an eyebrow and motioned for him to continue.

Gilbert sighed. “We need your help.”

“My help?” Thomas asked in disbelief. This was a trick. It had to be. Some sick appeal to his fraternity solidarity as a way to force his hand, after they were the ones to break that bond.

Only they all looked like they were guilty of something, and Thomas didn’t think they understood it was that they were in the wrong when it came to forcing him to flee Minneapolis or hunting him down.

Fuck.

“You are going to need to have one hell of an explanation for this and for why I should even think about helping the lot of you.” He raised a hand as Olavo opened his mouth. “Over coffee. The good stuff. You’re paying, oh and tea too.”

“I know the place!” Limbani exclaimed.

* * * * *

Denver, CO, February 3rd

The place Limbani 'knew' was a small coffee shop that didn't stand out from any of the dilapidated stores on the street. How the monkey knew this place, Thomas had no idea. It couldn't be part of a chain, and he didn't think his frat brothers had ever set foot in a coffee place where the coffees started at ten bucks. He certainly had never seen any of them frequenting the shops on the university grounds.

Felix was complaining the moment Limbani said it was only two blocks away. Thomas didn't care about the otter's unhappiness. Two blocks meant no need to go in Gilbert's van, so no chances this was a trick to catch him.

The shop only had half of its twenty or so tables occupied, and by men and woman dressed better than Thomas and Donal were only in that what they wore had been washed in the last two weeks, probably last week even. So a bunch of guys in thousand dollar overcoats attracted a lot of stares.

Even if they had entered one at a time, it would have been impossible not to make this a memorable moment for the customers.

Gilbert led Donal to the back, sitting him at the larger table there, his back to the wall. Thomas sat next to the squirrel before anyone else took that spot. Gilbert sat on the other side. Thomas didn't care. Now, if they tried anything, he could take himself and Donal to Montana with a thought.

He'd have to hope he'd have enough strength to tell Donal to fuck him, and that the squirrel could do it. Living on the street had left Thomas with little time to inquire about his friend's sexuality.

Donal took off his gloves as Felix and Limbani sat facing them.

"Couldn't you have seen us at something more..." Felix seemed to struggle for the word. "Upscale?"

The monkey opened his mouth, then closed it and fixed the otter with a glare. "You know what? I'm done explaining how this works." He stood and joined the capybara at the counter.

Felix rolled his eyes, then narrowed them, at what Donal held. "What's that, some fidget-toy?"

The squirrel had taken off his gloves, and was fiddling with his assemblage of small items. Thomas had asked about that either, but he's watched Donal add a bent penny he'd found poking out of a broken brick. He didn't think it was fidget-toy. Donal worked on it on and off every day, and not only when he was in stressful situation.

The squirrel shrugged. "Just something I work on to keep busy."

"Fidget-toy," the otter said with a sneer.

"You know," the squirrel said, without looking up from making a notch with a claw in what seemed to be the wooden core in which everything else was embedded. "You're not what I expected from Thomas's friends from university."

"And just what did you think his friends would be like?" Gilbert asked.

"Not totting grenades, for one thing," Donal answered in far too calm a tone.

"You didn't tell him about me?" the armadillo asked Thomas, sounding miffed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Was I suppose to go in individual detail of the guys who are hunting me down for not valid reason?" Thomas demanded, annoyed at his friend's entitlement. "And if I had felt the need to give him detail. I doubt your collection would have come up. Have you had that grenade in your truck the entire time I've known you?"

"Are you kidding me?" Gilbert asked and patted the overcoat's pocket. "I don't leave my lucky grenade in the truck. And if I had, there would be nothing left or it after what your *friend* did to my van."

Thomas stared and tried to determine if the armadillo was serious. Who in their right minds considered a grenade lucky?

Olavo and Limbani returned with trays holding mugs. Ceramic mugs instead of the paper cups Thomas had gotten used to over the last weeks. The capybara placed a black on before Thomas as he sat, and he breathed it in before enjoying a slow sip.

Mirabel's coffees were the highlight of his week, but those were only good in comparison to the swill he had to contend with the rest of the time. This...this was heaven in his hands.

He lowered the cup, and glances at Donal, who was drinking his tea, eyes closed, before looking at the others. "Alright, start at the beginning. Don't even think of making that joke," he told the monkey who was opening his muzzle, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "And make the start what happened to Madoc, since that's what you claim you need my help with."

Olavo finished mixing the sugar in his coffee. "We stayed at your grandfather's place for almost two full

days, since Limbani saw us there. He didn't see you there, but I figured it's where you were headed when you left with the kangaroo—"

"After he fried my van," Gilbert interjected, glaring at Thomas across Donal and over his mug.

"—why else would Limbani see us there."

"And why do we keep going where Lim 'sees' up being?" Felix demanded, making the air quotes. "It got Gilbert's van blown up, then we had to waste time at that old man's place who wouldn't even put out to make out time—"

"You hit on my grandfather?" Thomas asked in disbelief, then looked at Limbani who were his patented innocent smirk. "Never mind. I don't know why I'm even surprised."

"Hey," Gilbert protested, "some of us showed restraint."

Olavo smirked. "For my part, it was that I watched him shoot three guys down, so I knew better than to bother." His smile turned midly lecherous. "But I have to say that for a man his age, your mother's father has kept in very nice shape."

Thomas stared as the capybara licked his lips, then sipped his coffee. Then what was said registered.

"He's my father's dad," Thomas corrected, and the confusion that was shot his was kept his outrage at what the capybara had to be imagining doing to Magnus from raising again.

"We left," Limbani said, "when we saw that news story. Felix recognized the pickup and a few calls got us the location."

"He wasn't seeing you show up," Felix said, "so that's where we headed."

"We agreed Lim wasn't going to see anything," Yating said. "So he wouldn't send us on another wild goose chase. We figured you or the kangaroo would show up to take it out of impound at some point."

"I could have told you they weren't going to be there," Limbani said, then primly drank.

The red panda shrugged. "While we were waiting for you there, this van showed up," he glared at the monkey, "guys grabbed Madoc and they drove off."

"You didn't want me to see," Limbani said, still too primly for his own good, Thomas thought.

"What, some guys grabbed Madoc?" Thomas asked shifted the focus. "Our Madoc? Lifts close to three hundred pound, Madoc?"

"The guys who grabbed him weren't just bigger than he is," Gilbert said, "but bigger than everyone he's ever trained."

Thomas had trouble wrapping his mind around how big that made them. Madoc had a knack for training guys. There had been a joke, when Madoc started training Thomas, about making him worthy of a mister universe contest, and while he didn't know if any of the other guys the rat trained had taken part, they definitely could.

He looked at Limbani, seeing how he could see stuff, he'd have more information.

The monkey sighed in annoyance. "You know how this works, Thomas."

"No, I don't," he replied flatly.

"I've had to explain this to you at least a dozen time," Limbani said curtly. "I am beginning to think you are doing this because you know how aggravating I find it."

Thomas looked at the others, who didn't seem surprised at the outburst. Had he somehow switched place with some other universe version who actually knew what was going on?

"Limbani, until I teleported away from the frat, I didn't know magic existed. The only thing I understand now, is how you managed to constantly drag me to those public spots to fuck and we never got caught. But no, you never explained this to me."

The confusion was back, which confused Thomas too.

"What can I do?" Olavo asked.

Thomas figured he meant magically, but he'd never seen him do anything... well other than— "beat anyone at strip poker, and dress better than Felix."

Felix was the only one not snickering, bust glaring at the rat.

"I'm serious," the capybara said, once he'd regained control, "we all gave you a demonstration before the holidays."

"Unless you're referring to all the sex we had, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That king of counts," Limbani said.

Olavo searched Thomas's face. "You're serious? You don't remember anything about us showing you what our powers are?"

Thomas shook his head. "I know Yating's, since he walked through the truck and I punched through

him. And I worked out, Limbani's from all the bitching you guys did about his visions."

Olavo closed his eyes and pressed his index finger to his lips like he often did when he thought. "Alright. If nothing else, this explains why you're running so hard. That kangaroo messed with your memories."

"Don't you go accusing Grant of anything," Thomas warned, glaring. "He saved my life. If anyone's had their heads thrown in a blender, it's the lot of you. But this isn't about me. Limbani, how come you didn't see Madoc's kidnapping coming?"

The monkey sighed. "Fine. On account you don't remember I'll explain it, again. I have to make a conscious decision as to when I'll see. I'm not a precognitive in the sense that events come to me, I have to go looking, and I don't lock on something or someone else. I pick the time and I see what is happening around the me of that time. I wasn't looking in part because these guys were threatening to use dildos on me anytime I even looked like I wasn't 'in the moment'. I'll take cocks in my mouth and ass any minute of the day as a distraction, but toy? No thank you. The other reason is that once I've looked, I'm locked out of anything between now and then."

Thomas did his best to process the information. "But then, why did you look for me and not Madoc?"

"You still aren't listening," Limbani mumbled, then. "I see what happens where I am at that Time. I couldn't search for Madoc. What I did was looked ever so further ahead until I saw something pointing me in a direction I would have acted on."

"And you saw me in that alley," Thomas said. "You saw me running, which is why you had Olavo and Gilbert outside that lot." He thought over what had happened. "Why didn't you see me knock you on your ass?"

Limbani smirked. "Who says I didn't and just let you have the morale boost?"

Thomas ignored the humor, going over what the monkey had said. "You'd already looked beyond the fight." He looked around. "To some point when we're in here. That's how you knew about it. So you couldn't see what I'd do during the fight. You were locked out of it. No, you saw us outside, that's how you could lead us here."

Limbani beamed. "I know you were a smart ass on top of a really fuckable one."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "Fine, whatever. What I don't get is why you've bothered. You must have looked a bit ahead and you know there's no way I'm agreeing to any of this. I've had to live on the streets because of you guys, so why don't you go ask that Raphael he's so fond of to go rescue him?"

The others turned to the monkey, who shrugged. "Don't looked at me. Twelve hours from now I'm sucking him off in the back of Gilbert's van. I'm locked out of the how we get to that point."

"Limbani," Olavo said, exasperated, "we're here because you saw us here. I'm happy your vision had a positive result this time, but get off it, okay? We need to convince Thomas. Unless you want you overconfidence in your vision cause that vision to be wrong, you need to help."

That knocked a degree of seriousness into the monkey, Thomas thought, except that as he had that thought, Limbani flashed him the very not innocent 'I'm going to fuck you smile'. "You're going to come because you miss all the sex."

Thomas snorted, thinking of where his good chunk of the monkey he'd made had ended up going after he discovered a bathhouse was a rather affordable place to stay when it got bitterly cold.

"Grant introduced me to bathhouses, so that's a better luck next time." He saw the worry on their face and again their reaction confused him. "Seriously, guys. How can you think I'd want to help? For all I know you've tortured my dad to get him to tell you what bus I was on. Fuck why didn't you start all this with 'if you don't come with us, your parents get it'?"

"Look," Yating said, while the others reeled from Thomas' accusation. "I understand that asking that you do this because Mad's your frat brother isn't going to happen with the way your memories have—"

"Your memories," Thomas snapped. "You guys are the ones with the scrambled ones."

"Fine," Yating relented. "But don't you see that even if you don't want to help Madoc because of what you believe he did, coming with us gets you answers. Lets say that we are the ones whose memories have been altered so we'd chase you down. Don't you want to know why Raphael would go to that extreme?"

Thomas rubbed his temple. "Who is this Raphael?"

"He's your—" Olavo closed his mouth and exchange looks with the others. When he spoke again, it was cautiously. "He's Madoc's elder."

"And what does an elder do, exactly?" Thomas asked, feeling like it was a non-answer.

Felix chimed in. "He controls the Lewiston family. He makes all the big decisions regarding their estates and the men who bare is name."

Thomas took a sip of his, now only warm, coffee. "Okay. It would be nice to know why all this happened. The only problem I see is that whoever fucked with your minds can so the same with me when we

get there.”

“Then, you can leave,” Olavo said, raising a hand to silence Yating. “It’s not like we can stop you.”

Thomas looked at the large bay window. Olavo meant once they had rescued Madoc, but it was tempting to go now. Will himself to the other side of the street, where he could just make out an alley. He placed a hand on Donal’s thigh. Could he do this with someone else and stay conscious? Limbani said he’d looked twelve hours ahead. That gave him plenty of time to regain his strength and disappear deeper into the city.

He looked at the men seated around the table and tried to convince himself the worry on their face was an act. Limbani’s attempt a superior smirk didn’t look that could and his fear leaked though it. Felix was the only one looking more pissed than worried. Probably at Thomas, by the way he was glaring. As for why...?

It had to be a trap. Had to. Madoc was in a hotel room somewhere, having the fuck of his life, or at least the hour, and...

What if Thomas was wrong?

What if Madoc was really in trouble and Thomas refused to help? These guy had been his friends for half a year, his frat brothers. If their memories had been altered so they’d hunt him down, didn’t it make them as much victims as he was?

What did it say about Thomas if he turned away from his frat brothers when they needed his help?

“Let’s say, for the sake of argument,” he added as the monkey smirked. “That I’m willing to help. How exactly do you expect me to do that? I’m not some action hero. I don’t have training in my power, much less in how to pull of a rescue. You guys are the ones with the money, why aren’t you paying experts to do this?”

The look that passed among them was one of such discomfort Thomas had trouble believing there was something money couldn’t buy.

“Okay, why can’t you pay for his rescue?”

“Because it would make the situation worse,” Olavo answered. “Probably.”

“The city they took Madoc to is controlled by a family no one wants to piss off,” Gilbert said. “If it had been anywhere else, once of us would have asked for support from our family, but...” he shook his head. “Things are too risky with them.”

“You can teleport,” Yating said. “You can get to him, and get him out, then we run like crazy and deny ever being there if someone asks.”

“Wait a minute here.” Thomas cut him off. “Are you telling me those people everyone is scared of are who took Madoc?”

“Oh, Sweet Cum, I hope they aren’t involved,” Felix said, looking scared.

“They aren’t,” Limbani said. “It they were who had taken him, it would have been men in body armor instead of overmuscled thugs in a van. There was one tiger with them, but being a tiger doesn’t make you an Ort.”

They shushed him with such strength Thomas wondered of those people might have heard. “So, those Ors are who you’re all terrified off, and you want me to risk my tail going up against.”

“Not against,” Gilbert said, “just operate in their city.”

“What’s the city?” he asked reflexively. Considering their reaction, Thomas couldn’t think of one thing they could say that would make him agree to this.

“San Francisco,” Olavo said, and Thomas stared at the capybara as he put his phone on the table. Okay, so there might be one thing they could say.

On the phone was the website of a gym. The logo was a golden shield with the silhouette of a man with his arm at his side. A flexing pose Thomas didn’t remember the name of, but had seen Madoc do, and had had to attempt a time or two.

‘Hot muscle’ was the name of the gym.

“Are you guy sure they kidnapped Madoc? Jacked up guys pulling him in a truck to take him to a place where more jacked up guys will be present sounds like something Madoc might pull so he wouldn’t have to do what Limbani says anymore.”

“If Madoc had arranged this,” Gilbert said. “He wouldn’t have gone to San Francisco. Not after what took place between their families.”

“Not the time for gossip,” Olavo said as Felix started talking. “But yes, the Lewistons aren’t welcome there.”

“But look at it on the bright side,” Felix said, grinning. “No one knows you’re a Lewiston, so even if they do catch you, what’s the worse they’ll do?”

"I am not a Lewiston," Thomas replied and ignored the way the others had winced at what the otter said. That reaction couldn't bode well for anything happening if he was caught. Fuck, why did his backup plan had to be in that city?

"You should go," Donal said and Thomas looked at him suspiciously. Part of him wondered why he wasn't freaking out at half of what he'd listen to them say. "Look," he continued. "You should help them, pay it forward, I mean, and it's San Francisco, who wouldn't want to go there?"

So Donal remembered that talk, on the night they met. Thomas was surprised. What the squirrel made him realize he'd forgotten among the fear induced by the other's reactions was that so long as he was in the city, he could get in touch with the person Grant wanted him to go to for help. And with his power, trap or not trap, there was nothing they could do to keep him from vanishing.

Doing his best to sound reluctant, Thomas said. "Alright, I'm in."

"Told you," Limbani said, smiling proudly.

Chapter 28

I 70, CO, February 3rd

Thomas banging his head on the metal floor of the van didn't stop Limbani from banging him. He'd complain of the one, but he was enjoying the second too much. Oh, how he'd missed this.

"Next," the monkey said dreamily as he rolled off Thomas. He let out a shriek as his back hid the floor. "That's cold!" He grabbed the blankets that had been moved aside by Thomas's banding and pulled them under him.

"Hey Gilbert," Thomas called to the armadillo at the wheel, "how come you're still driving this thing? Wouldn't it be easier to buy a new one? You are rich, after all."

Gilbert glared at him over his shoulder. "This is my van. I'm not letting some asshole of a wizard take it from me just because he threw lightning at it. It survived that. It'll survive anything you want to throw at it."

"Eyes on the road," Yating said.

"Don't tell me how to drive," Gilbert snapped. "I let someone else drive my van once, you, and look what happened to it."

The red panda sighed. "Again, I wasn't in it when the kangaroo blew it up."

"He wasn't trying to blow it up," Thomas said.

"How do you know?" Gilbert demanded.

"Because plenty of cars, trucks, and vans have been hit by lightning and *not* blown up," he answered, unable to mask his annoyance at them making Grant the bad guy any chance they had.

"Like you didn't tell him what I normally carry," the armadillo said in an accusatory tone.

"I didn't." Thomas rubbed the heel of his palm into his eyes. "Fuck. I didn't even know you guys would be coming after me. And even if I'd expected you, me and Grant weren't past the keeping everything vague part of the driver-hitchhiker relationship."

"Aren't you happy Henry didn't let you hit the road with all your explosives now?" Limbani said, reaching for Thomas's cock. "Doesn't look like these two are coming over, so how about you fuck me?"

"Hey," the armadillo snapped. "If I'd had my stuff, he wouldn't have run off. You saw how my good luck charm was in keeping him still. Imagine what I could have gotten him to do with the rest."

Thomas didn't pay attention to the red panda's response. Limbani was on his stomach, offering him his ass, and that was far more appealing.

Thomas had definitely missed this monkey.

* * * * *

[I have a sense there should be a series of flashbacks here establish Thomas's and Limbani's relationship, but I can't think of what to use]

* * * * *

I 80, UT, February 4th

"I want to talk to Donal," Thomas told Limbani, sitting in the passenger seat. Yating was snoring next to Thomas after a long fucking. The red panda always made for a comfortable pillow to rest against. "Hand me your phone."

There had been one pit stop since leaving Denver. Both to use the restroom and so Gilbert could take his turn at Thomas's ass. There had been a suggestion Yating take over the driving so the armadillo could rest, but Gilbert had vehemently nixed the idea.

Limbani looked at Gilbert, who shrugged, then placed the call and handed the phone over.

"What do you want?" Felix answered and Thomas glared at the monkey, who smirked. He just had to call the otter instead of Olavo.

"To talk to Donal," Thomas replied curtly.

"Oh, it's you." The otter sounded bored. "You can't talk to him. Since you're with the others, I figured we didn't need him anymore and threw him out our hotel window. He's got a nice wail. Now I wish we'd gone to one with more floors so I could have listened to it longer."

"I'm okay," sounded a distant voice, before Thomas could unleash his anger on the otter. "Was that

necessary?" the squirrel asked, closer now.

"I've got to get my fun somehow," the otter replied, "since you aren't letting me fuck you anymore."

"I need rest," Donal protested, his voice clear enough to be the one holding the phone. "Don't you guys ever need to stop?"

"Not really," Thomas said. "So, you're into guys?"

"And girls. I thought you realized that when I mentioned the sugar daddy."

"You laughed at me when I offered you my ass," Thomas replied.

"I wasn't laughing at you, just the situation." There was a silence, and when he spoke again, Donal sounded concerned. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm good. On my way to catching up to all the sex I've missed these last weeks. You have no idea what you missed out on when you didn't accept my offer."

"I think I so," the squirrel replied with a chuckle, "not that I have any idea where we'd have found a place for all that sex, or been able to do, you know, the surviving part of surviving on the street. And before you get ideas. It's not because it would have been you that my ass would have been able to magically take that much sex."

"That's why you'd have been sucking me off in the mean that. It would have made for a great meal."

The squirrel laughed, and Thomas smiled.

"If you get tired of his bitching, just suck him off. He is an asshole, but he tastes great. Seriously, though, how are they treating you?"

Donal laughed again. "Do you have any idea when was the last time I stayed in a hotel, let alone the penthouse of one? I had a shower, with fur soap and all that. It's been months since my last one, and that was more me standing under a broken rain gutter. Olavo did something weird. I mean, it's been all kind of weird since watching you bounce around that parking lot and go through the panda. But I never had someone cum, then write on me with it."

"He what?"

"Relax, it's all good," Donal said calmly. "I've had this rash for weeks, not mange, just chemicals that got in my fur from one of the coats I found. He also insisted we have sex before I had my shower. When I pointed out how much I had to stink, he said stuff about the danger of using soap after so long without. To be honest, I tuned that part out and just said yes. The itch went away and my fur's never looked this good. I know I'm a hostage and all that, but I could get used to being this kind of prisoner."

Thomas had trouble processing what he's heard.

"That's good," he said finally, and wasn't sure he sounded certain. At least he'd confirmed Olavo and Felix hadn't hurt Donal. He'd tried to convince himself the guys he knew would never hurt anyone, but the way Olavo had categorically refused to let the squirrel go after Thomas agreed to help them and since he was sure they wouldn't have hunted him down just because some guy told them to, the doubt had remained.

The royal treatment hadn't even been on the distant radar of his expectations.

"Are you there yet?" Donal asked.

"No, we're somewhere west of Salt Lake City."

"Halfway there," Gilbert said.

"Halfway there," Thomas repeated.

"What's the plan once you get there?"

Thomas had a good idea what Donal meant, but even if he had one, he wouldn't say it out loud in the van. "We don't know. We're hoping to have more than Limbani's visions once we get there."

A door closed. "Are you talking to Thomas?" Olavo asked.

"Olavo wants to speak with you," Donal said. Before Thomas could protest, the phone changed hands.

"Are you satisfied we haven't tortured your friend?"

Thomas sighed. "What did you expect me to think, Olavo?"

"That you shouldn't try to bluff a master poker player. It's clear you remember that about me." Now it was the capybara who sighed. "We aren't the monsters you seem to think we are, Thomas."

"I didn't start this thinking you were monsters," Thomas replied. "But then you chased me out of the frat, out of Minneapolis, out of the fucking state, then another, all the while spouting stuff about Raphael, me betraying my family. How long did you expect me to continue thinking you guys were the same friends I've roomed with since the start of the school year?"

Thomas could almost hear Olavo run a hand down his face in the pause. "Alright. Hearing it said like that I can understand your reluctance to trust us."

Yating stirred under Thomas's back. "Looks like I'm about to be put to work again," he told Olavo, ignoring the panda's snicker. "You take good care of Donal."

"Don't worry, I'll have him screaming for more in no time. I know a few phrases that he is going to adore." The call terminated, leaving Thomas to wonder what that meant. Grant said the Society had a magic like his talisman, something Thomas could learn. Was that it? Only Olavo had said it like Thomas already knew what he meant. Something of their screw up memory then?

He lobbed the phone back to Limbani.

"Yating, how do you feel about seeing which one of us can get the monkey to howk the loudest?"

"I—" the panda began.

"Yes!" the monkey yelled, jumping in the back.

"Hey! Watch how you rock my van. The suspension's seen better days." The armadillo looked over his shoulder. "And record it. I don't want you to be able to claim he was louder with you, when *I* show you how it's done."

* * * * *

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 5th

"Well?" Yating asked Limbani who had been watching the front of Hot Muscle for the last fifteen minutes.

"We're not going in," the monkey finally said.

"What do you mean, we're not going in?" Gilbert demanded. "We're here because you said we were going to rescue Madoc."

"I said," The monkey snapped, "that I saw us driving to San Francisco with Thomas. So what else would be have been doing here?"

"I don't fucking believe it," the armadillo grumbled. He started the van. "Fine, where is it that you're seeing us going instead?"

When Limbani didn't answer, they looked at him.

"Limbani?" Thomas asked at the worry on the monkey's face.

"Look, I don't know, okay?"

"How the fuck—" Gilbert began, turning around in the seat.

"Shut up," Yating ordered.

"I know I'm like the one who knows the least about this stuff," Thomas said cautiously, unsure how to keep the worry from escalating. "But didn't you say your range is something like two days? We have to go somewhere in that time, right?"

The monkey closed his eyes tightly. "You're going to make a call, then we're driving and we're on..." he looked left and right, then up. "Pennsylvania Avenue and... it stops."

"What do you mean it stops?" Yating asked.

"I don't see anything after that."

"Does that means..." Thomas swallowed. "That you die?"

"No," Limbani protested, "I'd..." he shuddered. "Balls I hope not." He seemed to search, his head canting. "This reminds me more of how a call gets fuzzy when you jump from one cell region to another, but without resolving. I can tell there should be something there, but I'm not receiving it. Actually, it feels sort of like something I felt when we found you in Lewiston, I think that's why I didn't know the kangaroo would should up." He took his phone out. "But this goes on as far as I can try to see. So the next two days." He handed the phone to Thomas.

"Who is he calling?" Gilbert demanded.

"I don't know."

"Lim, I'm fucking getting tired of—"

"I don't know," the monkey snapped. "I already looked beyond that point, so all I have to go by is my memory of what I saw, and I was fucking more curious trying to understand where that call was leading us than listening in on a call."

Thomas looked from the phone to the monkey. "If you don't know who I'm calling, how do you expect me to? I don't know anyone in San Frans..."

"What is it?" Yating asked as Thomas put a hand to his breast pocket.

Had Grant said it would lead it to them, or let him call them? Considering what Limbani had seen, the answer seemed obvious. He didn't want to use it. He shouldn't. That was his backup plan and might still need to escape his friends.

Only... if something could keep Limbani from seeing what they were going to do, didn't it mean they were screwed without help?

"Fuck." He took the envelope out of the pocket, and the plastic bag, pocketing that again. Opening it, he was surprised not to find anything in it.

Had he lost the content somehow? Had Donal taken it out when before handing it—

Thomas shoved his paranoia down. Grant had written in the envelope, not put something in it.

Call first. The word said, above a phone number. Below that was an address.

He entered the number. It rang twice before someone answered.

"Who is this?" a woman demanded.

"Hi?" Thomas said hesitantly.

"Who is this?" she repeated.

"My—Name's Thomas. Thomas Hertz. I—"

"I don't know you," she stated.

"No. Grant Summer gave me your number. He said to call when I was in the city and that you could help me." This definitely wouldn't be how the kangaroo had envisioned the situation.

"Did he now?" she replied, bitterness dripping off her town. "Kind of presumptuous of him to think that."

"Please?" Thomas pleaded. "I can..." He hesitated. Somehow, this felt more degrading than when he'd considered selling his body to have something to eat. "I can sort of pay."

"Kid," she said, exasperation added to the bitterness. "A sort of payment only gets you a sort of help."

No, she couldn't just refuse. Grant had made it sound like— "he said that you'd consider what I can do worthwhile when you saw it."

She sighed. "Can't say I've ever needed muscle before. But since it's Grant, we can at least meet. I'm at —"

"Oh, I know where you live," Thomas hurried to say.

"Do you now?" she said sarcastically.

"Grant gave that to me too." He read the address

The call terminated.

"What just happened?" Yating asked as Thomas stared at the phone.

How was he going to tell them she wasn't helping?

"Was that a code?" Gilbert ask angrily. "Was that so she would trust us?"

"Don't be stupid," she answered, her voice coming from the van's sound system.

They all stared at the dash.

"Didn't you say the speakers were blown by the lightning bolt?" Limbani asked.

"They were," Gilbert replied uncertainly.

"Ohhhh, it's almost like I can do magic, isn't it?" she said in a spooky voice.

Chapter 29

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 5th

“And... now,” Limbani said, as they drove along Pennsylvania Avenue. “Is when the future stop being visible to me.”

The address the woman who spoke to them on Gilbert’s van’s non-working sound system gave them wasn’t the one Grant had written in the envelope. It was one five blocks beyond the monkey’s announcement.

The building wasn’t what Thomas expected. Grant had told him that anyone with magic who wasn’t wealthy did so by choice. Thomas hadn’t expected a mansion, since that wasn’t what he’d go for if he had wealth, but the low-end apartment building Gilbert stopped in front of hadn’t been what he’d expected either.

With a “see you upstairs”, and an earsplitting squawk, the speakers went back to not working.

Thomas couldn’t shake the feeling this was a joke as he pulled the door open. It had bars over it for security, but it didn’t need an access code to unlock. The lobby was dingy and didn’t have a security guard.

“She’s screwing with us,” Gilbert said darkly as they headed to the bank of utilitarian elevators at the back. It took them to the seventh floor without complaint, then it was a walk through a badly lit hall to number seventeen, which was the door at the end, on the left.

It opened as Thomas was about to knock, since where the buzzer should have been were only loose wires, and a pangolin in a pink bathroom and matching pink slippers looked him over. She pulled a drag from her electric cigarette, then blew mint-scented smoke at him.

“Yep. You don’t look anymore impressive in the flesh than you did on a screen.” She stepped out of the way. “I’m Shila, and don’t bother with your names; I already know them.”

Thomas shivered as he stepped in. Compared to what he’d lived with over these last weeks, this was warm, but he’d just been outside, where the sun had warmed them enough no one had bothered with jackets.

“Gotta keep the place cold for these.” He indicated the wall of servers that lined the living room walls. Flower pots hung from the ceiling with colorful plants in them. “Don’t touch anything,” she ordered, and sit down.

She sat on the flower print couch and filled delicate looking tea cups, from the just as delicate looking tea put that was on the coffee table. The thing looked like it should shatter if she just thought of picking it up.

Thomas moved one of the two chairs on the opposite side of the couch that had the same print patten on them. “We—”

“Yep,” she said, and he paused, halfway in the seat. “You, boys, really know how to get yourselves in the deepest shit available, don’t you?”

He checked with the others, and they looked as confused as he felt.

She laughed, then took a drag on her cigarette. “You don’t even know who you were looking at?” she snickered. “That gum, Hot Muscle? It’s Dietrich’s place of worship.”

Gilbert dropped on the couch opposite her, curing under his breath. Limbani had his head in his hands, on the other seat, and Yating was looking at the ceiling, eyes closed.

Thomas raised his hand. “Okay, I’m going to guess by your reaction that’s one of those Orrs you said we weren’t going to be dealing with, but—”

“What is this, high school?” Shila asked. “Lower the hand, kid.”

“What is a place of worship? I mean,” he immediately added, “I’m guessing you don’t mean a church, since it’s a gym.”

“Could be a church,” she replied with a snort, “the way that one loves to have guys worship him.”

“You know how we brought a lot of guys to the frat?” Yating asked and continued before Thomas had the time to roll his eyes. “The Orrs do that with some of their businesses. Turn them into places where they can fuck anyone who walks in.”

“It’s mostly night clubs of one sort or another,” she said, “but this one’s into muscle, so he has a gym where pumping iron is secondary to other kind off pumping, if you get my drift.”

“We do,” Gilbert replied, nearly snapping.

Thomas stared at Yating. “We’re supposed to get in there, get Madoc and not piss off the Orrs?” he asked in disbelief.

"I'm guessing the Madoc is the other rat?" Shila asked.

"Yes," Gilbert answered, then his tone turned suspicious. "How do you know that?"

"I backtracked your movements until I found something that explained why you were casing that gym," she replied. "I got to hand it to them. If the point was to start a fight between you and the Orrs, that was masterful. If that's not the point, then they're idiots. Who takes the van with the business logo of a place connected to the guy who trains them? I followed their movements and I'll tell you this much for free. They were smart enough not to go to any place connected to the Orrs with that rat."

"Where did they take him?" Limbani asked.

"That depends entirely on what this 'sort of being able to pay' looks like." She looked at Thomas. He stood, and she raised a hand. "I'm going to stop you right there. Even if you're bi, I'm not interes—"

Thomas watched her stare at the empty space he'd stood in an instant before from the entryway. She slowly turned her head in his direction, stared again, then snapped to the wall of servers. She spread her hand before her and an imaged of the room from different angles sprang up as a holographic display.

She replayed Thomas's disappearing act multiple times. "What's your range?" she asked at the point Thomas considered offering to take her with him as a more concrete proof.

"I can do line of sight safely, and alone for sure." He walked to his seat. "There's three times I went somewhere I couldn't see, but they left me drained close to death each time. I had to be—"

"I know how you guys work." The pangolin waved dismissively, still looking at the projections. "I don't want details."

"Line of sight's been getting easier the more I do it, it's basically effortless now unless I chain a lot of them in succession, so I'm hoping the other kind will get easier too once I get to practice it."

She nodded, and with a wave of the hand; the videos vanished. "I'm going to give what I found out; if you give me your word you'll do two things." Thomas nodded. "You keep me up to date in your progress. And when I call and tell you to move me, you do it without hesitation or questions."

"I'm not really a share-ride service," he said cautiously.

She snorted. "Do I look like I step out that door for anything short of an emergency?"

Thomas kept to himself what she looked like. A trailer part out of some old movies was where he'd expect to see someone like her, only in those, they had old style cigarettes. Niel often brought one for, in theory, him and Roland to watch, but the raccoon regularly convinced Thomas to join them.

Only, if Grant was right, this was a choice for her. Much like living out of his truck was a choice for the kangaroo.

"I promise," he said. "Do we shake on it, or do I need to sign something in blood?" he added with a grin.

"No blood," Yating and Limbani said at the same time in a nearly identical tone of horror. Thomas would have thought it was funny, except their expressions matched the tone. He filed that under something to ask about later.

Shila motioned around them. "It's recorded, and that's plenty for me." She took a memory chip from her bathrobe's pocket and placed it on the table. "That's everything I found on where they dropped off your friend. Address, blueprint, financial history, ownership history. It's a warehouse, but I can't tell you what's going on inside since there's nothing connected to the internet there."

She motioned and new videos appeared in the air. The building was large and nondescript, except for what Thomas thought of as the front, which had a store.

"Health store," she said. She pointed to muscular men entering the store on different screens. "Those are some I can confirm are involved."

"I recognize that guy," Gilbert said, pointing to a fox that was nearly bursting out of the shirt and sweat pants he wore.

She swiped, and the image was the fox exiting the store, but for a moment Thomas wasn't sure it was the same person, but he couldn't say why. Same coloring on the fox, same clothing bursting at the seams.

"Oh fuck," Gilbert said, as Thomas realized the fox hadn't been bursting out of his shirt, only nearly so.

"The guy needs to update his wardrobe before it really doesn't fit him anymore," Thomas said.

"That's one hour after he went in," Shila said.

"No one gains that much mass in an hour," Thomas said. "Madoc had me working out pretty hard. I have an idea what an hour gives, and it's not something you can notice like that." He looked at the image. "That's months of regular pumping."

"Not if Madoc fucked them," Yating said.

“Why would Madoc fucking them have anything to do with them getting bigger?” Thomas asked.

“That’s his power,” Gilbert said, “giving guys muscles.” He frowned at Thomas. “He explained that to you when he started training you.”

“No, that never came up. There was a lot of sex, but then when hasn’t there been sex with you guys?” he motioned to the image. “Shouldn’t we all put Mister Universe to shame if one hour with Madoc did that to him?”

“He had to will it to happen,” the armadillo said.

“Which means, they are forcing him to will it to happen,” Limbani said.

“Can they do that?” Thomas asked.

Yating sighed. “I really wish you hadn’t forgotten everything. Where magic is concerned, there’s little it can’t make happen.”

Chapter 30

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 15th

“Yes!” the naked monkey exclaimed, running into the suite’s dining area. “We’ll succeed!”

Thomas caught the plate the puma dropped as she squealed and moved to cover her eyes.

“Oh, food!” Limbani took the plate from Thomas and began eating the sausage.

“What’s with the running off?” the barely awake, naked panda said, exiting the same room.

The puma squealed again, and Thomas readied to catch another plate, but she had been in the process of reaching for the cart with the food this time. She didn’t cover her eyes, ogling the hard panda.

“Maybe you two should get dressed?” Thomas suggested, and the inside of the puma’s ears turned crimson as she finally covered her eyes and looked away.

Yating looked down at himself, then muttered something Thomas couldn’t make out, but he didn’t leave. Limbani’s replied was longer, but no more understandable because of the food he was shoving his in mouth.

That surprised Thomas since the monkey was known to hold conversations while having a cock in there.

Thomas received a glance from Gilbert and nothing more. When he tilted an ear to get the armadillo to do something, he looked at the hotel waiter.

“Thank you. We can handle the rest ourselves.” He handed her a hundred-dollar bill, and she bowed, thinking him profusely as she left. Thomas wondered if the size of the tip would make her talk about that instead of the two naked guys seated at the table.

The Marriot wouldn’t have been Thomas’s first choice as a place to stay while they readied themselves for rescuing Madoc. Even as a chain renowned for being affordable, they were more than he’d consider spending on lodging. He’d thought the snickering from the other two had been because Gilbert was slumming it when he picked it, but the suite they were in was high-end enough, it would make even Felix happy.

“I thought you weren’t seeing anything?” Gilbert said.

“In two days,” Limbani said after swallowing, “we’re driving out of the city along the I-80 and Madoc is in the van with us.”

“How do we do it?” Yating asked, then gave a jaw breaking yawn as he pulled the cart to him.

“No idea.” The monkey leaned onto the panda as he reached for the plate of toasts and eggs and somehow didn’t inconvenience Yating as he forked a steak onto his plate. “That’s the moment my vision kicks back in.”

Thomas watched as the monkey put a slice oh ham, one of tomato and a poached egg onto a toast, then rolled it before putting it to his lips, winking at the rat, and pushing the whole thing into his muzzle.

Thomas went back to eating, ignoring the image Limbani had given him with that. The question tried to force its way out the entire time he finished his scrambled eggs and ham. He wanted one of them to say it, but they were all busy also eating. Limbani more like inhaling.

“You guys think I’m ready?” Thomas finally asked as he stared at the empty place.

“You’re familiar with the room,” Gilbert said casually, “enough you jumped from the park across the road to it and didn’t die.” He closed his eyes and sipped his coffee, letting out a sigh of enjoyment that felt over the top to Thomas.

“That’s because Limbani was there to fuck me,” Thomas pointed out, slightly perturbed by the casual way that wasn’t even commented on by the armadillo.

“And I’m going to be there this time, too.” The monkey said, smiling.

“You,” Thomas stated, “are enjoying this too much.”

“Your ass, my cock.” The smile turned lewd. “What’s not to enjoy?”

“Madoc’s going to be there too.” Yating filled his cup from the carafe of green tea. “I wasn’t affected by the teleportation, so he’ll be able to fuck you, too. The problem might be getting him to stop, since whatever they’ve given him will still be in his system.”

“How is that a problem?” Limbani asked.

“I’m not interested in ending up looking like a roid abuser,” Thomas said, “or have you forgotten

they're using that to get him to use his power on them?"

"Getting you functional won't be enough to cause that," Yating said. "It's the equivalent of a week of solid working out."

"I don't think one week's training would have caused that fox to burst the seam of his shirt like that," Thomas pointed out.

"Madoc can fuck someone more than once in an hour," Gilbert replied.

"And how many does it take to do what that fox showed?"

The armadillo shrugged. "It's not like I've ever run tests of his power."

"If I can't stop him," Thomas said, "I'm counting on you to pull him out of me when I say so," he told the monkey. "I hope he doesn't get it in his head that he can turn me into a Mister Universe, now that he won't have to hide what his fucking does around me."

Thomas pointedly ignored the looks they gave him as he stole toasts from the monkey and built himself a breakfast sandwich. There might be doubts about who's version of the memories were correct—Thomas's, as far as he was concerned—but what was certain was that he'd didn't want to get into this even slightly hungry. The week of training had showed him that on top of draining his magical reserves, it was just plain exhausting.

It had started when, after the conversation with Shila, Gilbert had quizzed Thomas about the limitation of his teleportation.

What did line-of-sight mean? How much weight could he carry? Could he still do it if, after looking at his target location, he closed his eyes? How much did each jump drain him? Why had he ended up in a grotto a full state away when he'd teleported with the kangaroo? Why had it drained him just as much as teleporting from the kitchen in the frat to his bedroom with Yating had?

When Thomas hadn't had answers, or at least nothing to satisfy the armadillo, Gilbert had set up a series of experiment-training exercises to answer them.

They had discovered that yes, Thomas needed to actively look at his target arrival point to get there and remain standing. [if this needs to be changed, just let me know. I can't recall a point where this comes into play] He could carry someone with no noticeable extra drain. And, after what felt like an unending session of twenty questions, Gilbert had worked out what Thomas needed to set an unseen location as his arrival point.

It had come after he asked the rat why a grotto in the middle of nowhere.

* * * * *

Bozeman, MT, December 24th. Eight year old Thomas

The opening in the hill nearly made him cry with joy, but he didn't. Thomas wasn't a baby. Babies didn't get asked to come hunting his GrandPa Magnus, dad and Victor.

He hadn't meant to lose track of the others, but he'd been so surprised to see the quad raccoon he hadn't been able to stop himself from chasing after it. It would have been so funny when he brought it to little Roland and said this was what had become of Niel the Neighbor.

Only now it wasn't funny anymore, because the quad had just vanished, and when Thomas had retraced his steps, he hadn't ended up this is family or at the house, but lost.

He hadn't cried.

He'd decided where Grandpa Magnus's house was and set out in that direction. He'd get there before it got too cold. It was always cold when they came to visit Grandpa Magnus. Thomas had decided that Montana was where Winter went when it wasn't busy making Minnesota white.

It got colder and colder as he walked, and somehow the house wasn't there.

He hadn't cried.

But he had gotten scared.

And now, there was the opening in the hill, out of the building wind.

And once inside, it was warm. So warm could be inside by the door, just after his mother came in with Roland and his baby brother fussed and kept her from closing the door. Roland cried a lot.

Roland was still a baby.

It was magic, Thomas decided, that made the grotto so warm. Magic put there just for him because he was getting too cold. They needed to visit Grandpa Magnus when winter was busy elsewhere next time.

He'd sat at the back of the grotto, as far from the cold as he could. There was even a stone bench there, just for him to sit on. He pulled his knees to himself and wished his father would find him already. He wished he's stayed in the house. He wished they hadn't come here to celebrate Christmas this year.

He wished he wasn't alone right now.

He wanted to cry.

If he was still a baby, he wouldn't be lost right now. He'd be in his mother's arm, fussing and she's laughed, call him silly and rock him.

The warmth wasn't as much as he'd thought of initially. But it was enough that as the light faded, and closed his eyes in emotional exhaustion, he felt safe here.

* * * * *

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 7th

Thomas was on hand and knees with Limbani pounding into him. He tried to focus on the cock slamming in and the panda's mouth wrapped around his erection, but as his orgasm approached, all he could think about was the color of the wallpaper, its texture. The smell in the air, the way the bed cover felt in his hands. How the room made him feel.

His orgasm hit, and Thomas was the room. He knew it in all intimate details, the scratch on the bed's footing, the one on the left. The dresser and how the varnish was peeling at the back of it. Thomas had given birth to this room.

"So?" Gilbert asked, as Thomas returned to himself.

This was the third time the armadillo and written something in cum on the patch of skin he'd shaved of Thomas's upper back, and then had had him fucked and made to orgasm.

The previous two had given Thomas a sharper sense of the bedroom, but he hadn't become it.

"How again, did you think to make this... *phrase*?" it was weird putting the inflection in the word that turned it from what it meant to something that meant magic.

"I needed to study the particulate distribution under decompression expansion."

"He wanted to see something blow up better," Yating said, then licked Thomas's still hard cock.

Thomas nodded. Same answer as the previous two times he'd asked. "But you need to cum at the right time. Otherwise you miss it."

"Gilbert and things going kaboom," the monkey said. "Not hard for him to time an orgasm to that."

"But it can't be him just jerking off, right? It has to be sex."

"Yes," the panda replied.

"So, who fucks him next to the explosion?"

"You mean who hasn't fucked him next to an explosion?" Limbani said.

"You guys are all insane."

"You seemed eager enough when you did it," Gilbert said.

Thomas stared at him. "I didn't."

He hadn't. He couldn't.

He would remember doing something that utterly stupid.

Right?

* * * * *

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 15th

"I'm waiting?" Limbani called from the other side of the door.

"This isn't working," Thomas said, eyes closed. "Again."

"Are you focusing on the sense of the room you gained?"

"I'm trying, but this makes no sense. Don't—" too late.

"Look," Gilbert started explaining again. "The thing the grotto, your bedroom at the frat have in common, is that you build an emotional sense of the place. The bedroom because you lived there for months and had a lot of sex in it, the grotto because it was your oasis in a moment of childhood crisis. I suspect that once you explore your power, you'll find other locations like that. Your bedroom in your parent's house is likely a possibility. Since you don't have the time to build that emotional sense of this hotel bedroom, my phrase has let you gain an actual sense of it, so intimate it should let you use it."

"Except it didn't work before."

"But before, you didn't get that strong reaction you did this time. Feel that."

"Be the fucking room," Thomas muttered under his breath. And the crazy part was that he could be. He remembered what it felt like being the room, with the three guys fucking on the bed. The way the light shining in from the crack in the curtain felt on the textured wallpaper.

But he was still standing here on this side of the door with a monkey eager to fuck him on the other side. That alone should be enough to make him appear there, but here he was. It had been easier to grab onto Grant and take him to the grotto than...

No, that hadn't been easier.

He'd been surprised by the flash of light. He'd been terrified they were about to die.

He'd been terrified.

He squeezed his chest, tightened his 'heart' until the shiver ran down his spine.

Then, he was tipping forward to the yells of joys of a monkey next to him, and an armadillo, on the other side of a door.

Then he was unconscious.

Chapter 31

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 15th

Thomas looked at the phone Yating had gotten him the day before to make sure the app was active, then stepped into Body Healthy, the store attached to the warehouse that was their target. The phone was mainly so Yating and Gilbert could track his movements within the store, then the warehouse. And because there was a worry the lack of technology in the warehouse itself meant they had scramblers, the armadillo had written something with his cum on a strip of leather, then sprayed a sealant over that once it was dry.

Thomas had asked why sex wasn't needed to activate it, and received a glare from Gilbert and a firm statement they didn't have the time to go over how magic worked again. Then he'd grumbled about lost memories and chocking whoever was responsible.

Then he'd asked that if they ended up depending on the phrase. How was he going to let them know he'd Madoc in the warehouse if he couldn't use the phone to message them?

That has resulted in an angry armadillo screaming insults at the air until he set to just tear it up. He'd feel the end of the magic and he'd know it was time for Yating to walk them into the warehouse.

The panda hadn't looked eager, since making someone else intangible was uncomfortable, but he too had been practicing, and they were all going to do everything they could to rescue their frat brother.

Thomas looked at the products on the shelves as he walked to the back, tried to act interested in them to avoid drawing attention to himself. The double door leading to the store's storage had windows. A glance to make sure no one was looking, then a look in to confirm there was no one there and he teleported.

Locating the door to the warehouse was simple, as it was the only other door there, between two stacks of boxes of protein powder. That one didn't have a window, but it wasn't locked. Cracking it open showed him the large space that was the empty warehouse. The only lights on the ceiling that were on created a path to the center, then left where it ended at a wall with doors in it. The rest of the space was dark enough he figured that so long as he was quiet and didn't light up a flare, he'd be undetected.

At least the one part Gilbert had expected to be complicated, the locating of Madoc, was going to be simple. Of course, now that he'd thought that, Thomas couldn't help also thinking that if this was a movie, he'd be anywhere but there.

He figured the guys seated at the edge of the light in an area set up as a lounge, with a coffee table, and cabinet with bottled water, were a good sign he was on the right path.

"You ever think you'd take it from anyone than him?" a civet with so many muscles on him he'd never need a gym again, asked the panther seated across from him. The panther had nearly as many muscles.

He guffawed. "You kidding? I'm not gay. But having *him* fuck me got me into the circuit, and with this guy doing it, I'm going to win."

"You?" a wolf said, standing, the town covering his groin slipping off in the process. "You'll only win if you stay out of my way." He posed, but Thomas wasn't looking at his arms or the chest. That ass looked way too inviting.

He focused. The panther had motioned to the door when he'd said 'this guy', so Thomas had the right place. The only problem was that he couldn't reach the door to tell what was on the other side. The plan had called for more precision than that, but Gilbert would have to make do.

He moved as close as he comfortable doing to the light circle, then took his phone and. Blocking its light with his jacket, wrote his message.

I'm as close as I can get. The door is guarded. It's twenty feet ahead of me. I can't tell you what's behind or where Madoc will be there.

The men were now all posing, trying to outdo the others.

We're going in. Came the response.

Thomas waited. Gilbert and Yating's role as diversion had become more important since he needed to get

inside to get to Madoc and teleport the two of them to the hotel. Yating would then phase him and Gilbert back outside and drive there. The red panda had looked as confident about managing it as Thomas had of teleporting to the hotel before the intense week of training, but he was here anyway.

A little over five minutes was how long it took until sounds of a commotion came from behind the wall. The posers stopped posing, looked at each other, confused, before the wolf took his towel off the floor and wrapped it around his waist before heading for the door.

As he reached for the handle, there was an explosion that had the wolf leap back and lose his towel, and Thomas stare as the door limply fell off its hinges.

That's it? Gilbert carries a grenade in his pocket, basically sleeps with fireworks, and that's the explosion he managed? Someone was going to have to stop boasting.

Thomas couldn't see on the other side of the door from where he stood, so he teleported deeper into the warehouse, looked beyond the door, and was there, among the chaos of muscular men screaming as they tried and failed to grab hold of a red panda who, for all that he looked about to throw up, was still intangible. Gilbert was holding three walls of muscle at bay by bouncing his grenade in a hand, grinning like a maniac.

"Over there," the red panda said on seeing him, and pointed to a line of three, again too muscular men, looking ready to take on anyone who got close to them.

Thomas appeared to the side of them, well out of reach of the one he surprised. Behind them, Madoc stared at Thomas in shock. Thomas was next to him, grabbed him and—

The other rat pulled out of his grip. "Don't!" he backpedaled away.

"We're here to rescue you!" He teleported out of the way of the man who tried to grab him and reached for Madoc again, only for the rat to dodge.

"Will everyone just stop!" Madoc yelled, stunning Thomas still, along with everyone else. "If you don't put that thing away, Gil, I am going to shove it in so deep you're going to think He's got his balls in there."

Thomas got over the surprise as Gilbert hurried to pocket his grenade.

He appeared next to the rat, only for him to dodge again.

"If they scrambled your brains," Thomas said, glaring at the rat, "I'm going to—"

"Stop," Madoc ordered, "Don't... don't blink closer."

"I'm trying to save you!" Thomas yelled.

"I don't want to be saved!" Madoc replied, just as loudly.

"Are you fucking insane?" Thomas yelled even louder. "They kidnapped you!" maybe he could get the common sense to slam in with pure volume.

"Have you looked at them?" the rat gestured at the naked muscular men in the large room.

"How the fuck can I have not looked? Any bigger and we wouldn't fit in here."

"Exactly!" Madoc yelled, looking like a starving man being offered a buffet. "I've never had anyone I fuck get as big as these guys as fast. I can feel it happening as I fuck them. It's fucking amazing."

Thomas swallowed at the mania in Madoc's eyes. He'd never seen him behave that way at the gym, and it was reminiscent of Gilbert when he got going on the benefits of explosives to society.

Was that a Society thing? Was Thomas going to discover some kink that drove him to mania, too? Well, many two among the dozen guys he knew didn't qualify as 'a thing'.

"Thomas," Yating yelled. "Get him."

Right. He appeared behind Madoc, but his armed closed around empty air. When had the rat gotten that fast?

Gilbert tried to intercept the running rat, only to be shouldered aside hard. Then Madoc was out of the room.

Thomas appeared at the door, and Madoc was heading for the one leading to the health store. Then his sight was blocked by a massive, gray furred chest as the flexing wolf from earlier grabbed him.

Thomas turned his head enough to see something, then he was out of the hold. He looked at Madoc's goal as the civet jumped at him. Then he was there, turning around, crossing his arms over his chest as the other rat skidded to a stop. Thomas grinned as the other's eyes grew wide.

Take that, Madoc, Thomas thought, please that he'd impressed the—

Someone behind Thomas cleared his throat.

Thomas looked over his shoulder, ready to tell them to come back later, when they weren't busy, but the wall of muscle, covered in striped fur, smiled at him. Thomas quickly backed away. Surprise he wasn't in the grotto at the danger he felt being smiled at like that.

The men who had been running after him had stopped, and the sound of protests from those behind

ended the moment they looked around the blockage.

Yating ran through them, then skidded to a stop and ended up looking even more sick as he stared at the man looking them over.

The tiger shifted his gaze from Thomas, Madoc, Yating, and Gilbert, who swore under his breath and put a hand in the pocket holding his grenade, then slowed as he looked at the other men assembled.

Thomas was comforted by the knowledge that he wasn't imagining the shitload of trouble they were in.

"I could twenty-three of them," someone said, and Thomas looked at the baboon standing next to the giant of a tiger, holding an extended phone and going over it with a stylus. There was a sense of an administrative assistant to the man, if those came in three hundred pounds of muscle format. "That leaves eight of them unaccounted for."

Thomas's fleeting thought of how a movie would go came back to him and he decided this was a bad movie to be in. He caught Madoc's erection out of the corner of his eye. A bad porno movie at that.

"You're Dietrich Orr," Madoc said in awe.

What were the odds this was some other tiger with the last name of Orr, instead of the super dangerous ones they weren't going to be tangling with?

"You aren't one of mind." The tiger said, his deep voice nearly making Thomas's bone vibrate. "What is your part in this?"

"You were Mister Universe in twenty-three, four and five," Madoc said, instead of answering the question, the awe still heavy. "Before that, you won the San Francisco Bay Master Muscle four years in a row. You were the youngest to ever win."

The tiger straightened under the rat's praise.

Thomas shook the surprise away. They didn't have the time for this. They needed to get out of here and—

"Young man," the baboon said, just as Thomas was about to reach for Madoc. "I strongly recommend you stay where you are. You are in enough trouble as it is. You don't want to anger Mister Orr."

Thomas froze. How? The guy hadn't even looked up from his phone. Magic again?

The admonishment caused the tiger to look away from Madoc and back to the muscular men, well, more muscular than Thomas and his friends. It wasn't often Thomas was left feeling puny since Madoc had started training him.

"I'm going to ask this once. If I don't get an answer, you're all kicked out. You'll lose all the benefits you got from being part of my gym. All of them," he emphasized. "Am I clear?"

Thomas didn't look at the men behind him, or hear anything from them, but the tiger nodded in satisfaction.

"Who is responsible for the muscle mass you've gained." The anger in the voice made Thomas step back.

"I did it," Madoc answered with pride.

The tiger narrowed his eyes on him. "You expect me to believe a kid came up with a steroid no test can detect and that creates the kind of results anyone can see in days?"

"Not steroids," Madoc said, insulted. "It's my power. When I fuck a guy, I can give them the equivalent of three of four intense training sessions."

"That would explain why the drug tests have all come back negative," the baboon pointed out.

The tiger nodded. "Don't think that means you're off the hook," he told the men. "You went behind my back." When he looked at Madoc again, his gaze wasn't as severe. "Which family are you from?"

"Yours," the rat replied.

The baboon snickered.

Thomas glared at Madoc. What was he playing at?

The tiger canted an ear. "I mean the Society. That is who the four of you are with, right? So, which of those families are you from?"

"They don't matter," Madoc said breathlessly. "Make me yours."

"What the fuck?" Thomas exclaimed and pulled at the rat so he would face him. "How can you tell him your family doesn't matter?"

"Fuck off," Madoc snapped. Pulling his arm out of the hold. "You don't get to talk about our family after the betrayal you pulled on Raphael."

"I don't even know who that is! Shut up!" he yelled before the rat opened his mouth. "I don't fucking

care who is he. What I want to know is how the fuck you can tell that guy that your son doesn't matter."

Madoc stared at Thomas, the anger slowly shifting to confusion. "What son?"

* * * * *

Minneapolis, November 27th

"Pryce," the rat in the doorway said to the child in his arms, "I want you to meet your frat uncle, Thomas." Madoc beamed. "Thomas, this is my son, Pryce Lewiston."

Thomas stared at the small rat in his frat brother's arms and tried to get his brain to engage. It had been enough of a surprise for his aunt Corina to show up with a fiancée, but for Madoc to be here too and relate the fiancée was nearly too much, and learning he was a father?

His brain could be excused for going strike at the sheer number of surprises.

He shook himself and stepped out of the way. "Come on in." He had been about to close the door when Madoc had made his presence known. "What are you doing here?" He did his best not to sound accusatory as he closed the door. "You went home only a few days ago."

"And I— no, Pryce, don't do that," Madoc said as his son reached for Thomas's whiskers. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "You want to aim a little lower, like that." The rat reached for Thomas's nipple.

"Madoc," Thomas hissed, and the other rat chuckled. "Don't you think he's kind of young for that?"

Madoc rolled his eyes and whispered something in his son's ear. He gave him a knowing nod before looking up at Thomas. "I ran into Ettore and Corina as I got home. There were there for the perfunctory greeting and so Ettore could introduce Corina to Raphael so he'd finally stop bothering him. She mentioned they were heading to Minneapolis to visit family during that time, and Raphael had to give her the third degree and make sure she was good enough."

Thomas tilted an ear. That had to have gone over well with his aunt. He wondered if she'd been willing to tell that story with the same openness she talked about her sexual exploits.

"I'm guessing her family name came up, and you made the connection."

"I did confirm with her before jumping to the conclusion you were related, but yeah. I figured there weren't that many Hertz who were also hooded rats in the whole of the twin cities."

"So you decided to ditch your family to meet mine?"

"The only reason I went home was to be with this guy. Since Ettore was coming here, I was able to convince Raphael it would be safe for me to take him, too. If I could convince him the frat was safe, I wouldn't have a reason to ever go back there."

"You should bring him. I'm sure the guys there would love to meet him."

Madoc smiled. "Where do you think I'm going after the festivities here? Unless you were planning on offering for me to sleep with you."

"No." Thomas stated.

"Really? I'd think they already know what we've gotten up to."

"And do you have any idea how hard it is to get them to stop asking for details? The walls in this house are paper thin and there are no locks on any doors. The instant we make a sound, Judith will be in there with her phone, recording it, and it's going to be shown at every family dinner."

"Really?"

"Yes," Thomas said in exasperation. "Now you know why—"

"Would she send me a copy?"

Thomas stared. "Why am I even surprised?"

Madoc chuckled. "Trust me, we ask ourselves that question on a nearly daily basis." His amusement faded. "I couldn't keep Pryce with me at the frat. Raphael won't let the kids off the estate unless they have proper protection." He fussed Pryce's short head fur with a finger. "But at least, he gets to find out how great the Hertz are."

"They are rather amazing, aren't they?" Orinda said, stopping by them, holding a boy in her arms [I need his name] "and who is this handsome boy?" she cooed at Pryce.

"Orinda, meet Pryce," Thomas said. "Orinda is Victor's wife, and that's [name] one of their twins."

"Do you think they can play together?" Orinda asked. [other twin's name] is in the family room with his father.

Madoc put Pryce down and took his jacket off. "You go make friends, Pryce. Daddy's going to be right here with Thomas."

Thomas watched Pryce waddle after Orinda, wondering if he should warn them of the danger of

molestation? Pryce might be a child, but he was Madoc's son and Thomas didn't... He shook himself, he was just a child and that wasn't going to happen.

"How about I take your jacket and we can—"

"A Lewiston?" Grandma Royer exclaimed.

* * * * *

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 15th

Thomas noticed the same confusion the way Yating and Gilbert looked at him. How could they too have forgotten Madoc had a son?

"Alright," the tiger said, his tone turning severe again. "You're all going to—"

Madoc looked away from Thomas, and he took the opportunity. He grabbed his arm and Madoc pulled, sending him off balance, but didn't cause him to let go. space wrenched around them hard but instead of falling on the concrete floor, he and Madoc bounced off the bed to Limbani's joyful glee.

"Don't let him leave," Thomas managed to say, then consciousness left him.

Chapter 32

San Francisco Bay, CA, February 15th

Thomas cracked an eye open and found a naked rat glaring at him from a chair a few feet away. "I'm going back to sleep," he mumbled as he turned on his other side. "Put something on, Roland, before I do something about it."

"And what are you going to do about it?" the rat asked.

"Get you in—" Thomas sat so fast his head spun. "You aren't Roland," he told Madoc.

The rat's grin wasn't a pleasant one. "And what would you have done to your brother?"

"Kicked him out of my room!" Thomas yells, pointing to the door and fought to keep the image of him and Roland in the same bed, moving against each other, from forming. Why was he even fantasizing about his brother considering all the sex he'd had recently, or just for him to be able to be awake now. "This isn't my room," he added as the high quality furniture registered, along with the window and tall buildings he could see.

"You're lucky," Madoc said slowly, "that I'm such a good guy, Thomas. I was really tempted to let you die for what you did."

"Limbani?" Thomas asked, searching for the monkey.

"He isn't as strong as I am." Madoc rubbed his eyes. "What the fuck were you—"

The door slammed against the wall and the monkey exclaimed. "You're okay!" Then he was on the bed wrapping his arms around the smaller rat.

"Get off me, Limbani," Thomas ordered.

"Okay." The monkey let go and slid down between Thomas's legs. He swallowed the already hard cock and the rat cursed as he moans.

He pushed Limbani away from his cock enough to grumble. "We don't have the time for this."

"You can't stop it," the monkey replied with a smirk. "I saw it happen." And he was back down, slurping the cock in his muzzle.

The moans interfering with his cursing, Thomas reached down and grabbed the monkey's tail, pulling on it threateningly. "You can't see anything until we're on our way out of the city."

"Come on," Limbani whined. "It's been almost an hours."

"Madoc, can you take him so I can get dressed?" Thomas asked in desperation. As good as the monkey's mouth felt, and it always felt good. He needed to his his head on straight and make sure they were ready to leave. One hour. The others—

He looked at the other rat when he neither replied nor moved. The expression was controlled anger. Finally he pushed himself of the chair, grabbed the monkey by a shoulder and pushed him on the other half of the large bed.

"You've got until we're done." Madoc held the protesting Limbani down with a hand, then pushed his cock in the ass. The protesting turned into moans and demands for the rat to go harder.

"Where are the others?" Thomas asked, jumping out of bed. "If they're here, wh are they forcing Limbani to abstain for an hour?" He grab his shirt and pants. Where the fuck had his underwear gone to?

"I—" Limbani started only for a grunt to interrupt him. "I can—" this time it was a squeal, and Thomas glanced in his direction. As expected, Madoc had bottomed out. "I go hours without sex," he hurried to say, then he was moaning and the rat fucked him hard.

Thomas snorted and gave up on the underwear. If he knew Limbani, the monkey had shredded them before throwing them in the garbage. "And then, once the class is over, you're begging one of us to find you and fuck your brains out so you can forget how the world almost ended." He pulled his pants on.

"This isn't—" he moaned "about me." He groaned. "It's about—" he squealed. "Just like that! About you!" He bit the pillow as Madoc slammed his cock in. "I just got to fuck" the moan stretched as the rat slowly pulled out. "Once, and then grumpy balls tossed me—" Madoc slammed in again. "Out!"

As Thomas put his shirt on, Madoc grunted and was still. Then he look at Thomas, and he raise his hand to stop the bigger rat from coming after and treating him like he just had the monkey.

"Where are Gilbert and Yating."

"We're here," the armadillo said, striding into the room, naked. "What's with the clothes?"

"What's with the nakedness?" Thomas countered. "The plan was to jump in the van the moment you got here even if I couldn't walk and high tail it out of the city." Thomas noticed the red panda was missing, even if Gilbert had said 'we'.

"The plan got complicated," Gilbert said. "Yat's in the living room pulling himself back together. The physical discomfort he felt going in turn into nearly physical disincorporation going out. The plan was to go in, cause a distraction so you could grab Madoc and then we left. There are limits on how long Yat can phase and I think we broke some of them dealing with mister uncooperative over there."

"Did any of you even think to call me and ask if I needed rescuing?" the larger rat demanded.

"We would have," Gilbert replied, nearly throwing the phone at Madoc. "If you hadn't dropped it when you got kidnapped."

"Are you telling me you guys waiting for me to be awake before letting all of this out?"

"Someone." Gilbert glared at Madoc. "Slammed the door on Limbani with threats of ripping balls out if we so much as knocked on the door before he was ready to let us in."

Thomas started at the monkey. "You came in with that threat hanging over you?"

"I needed to know you were okay," Limbani replied, giving him an innocent smile. "Madoc was really mad at you."

Thomas looked from one to the other and tried to come up with something to say as a reply. His stomach growled. That worked.

"I need to eat."

Before he had turned to the door, there was a blur of fur, then Limbani stood in the doorway, hands on the door frame, offering himself seductively to the rat.

"Solid food," Thomas stated, pushing him out of the way.

"I'm not hard enough for you?" Limbani asked, pushing the dramatic tone to eleven.

Thomas rolled his eyes without looking back. He made it to the living room and was next to the food cart, shoving crackers in his mouth before noticing there was someone else in the room.

"Glad you're okay," Yating said, seated on the couch leaning forward. He lowered his head between his knees again.

"You're looking... solid." Thomas grabbed a plate and put food on it.

The panda looked up again, then at his hand, before nodding. "It doesn't take all my concentration for that anymore. Fuck. I never want to do this again."

"You have a superpower and you haven't trained it anymore than this week?" at least Thomas had the excuse he'd been on the run, then lived on the street, and it hadn't even been two months since he'd found out he could teleport.

"It's not a superpower to be gallivanted about," the panda replied, his attempt at snapping was ruined as he looked about to throw up and out his head between his knees again. "It's a gift from my god. It's to be treated with respect."

Thomas thought back to certain events at the frat house. "Let me guess, all those times you told me about some secret passage or that one letting you get from one side of the house to the other faster than I could run. That was just you not gallivanting your gift about, right?"

"The house is private," the panda replied weakly.

Thomas took a sausage and offered it to him. "Eat something."

"I can't eat, I'm going to be sick."

"No you're not. If you haven't pushed yourself hard until now, you probably don't realize how much calories using your power burns, I know mine does. You feel this way because you have no idea what to do about that sensation. Just take this sausage and nibble at it."

"With pleasure," Limbani said, and before Thomas understood what happened, he was pushed onto a seat, his pants were unzipped and hot lips were around his cock. He reached to push the monkey away, but he had a plate in one hand, and a sausage in the other. The sausage was taken away, but before he could use the freed hand, a cup of coffee was put in it by Gilbert.

"Should we—" he moaned, "get going." He fought to keep the coffee from sloshing over the side and Limbani deep throated his cock and Thomas's eyes nearly rolled back in his head. "Fuck." He caught his breath between moans as the monkey eagerly bobbed. "You know—" he bit back the groan. "Before the—" this one escaped him. "Big bad—" this moan was loud. "Orr comes."

"You'll cum first," Limbani said around the cock, "we have time." Then he was back to sucking him off.

“Not an infinite amount,” Gilbert said, his own cup in hand, “but enough to get you and Yating to the point where no one will call you on sight.” He glanced at the other rat, piling on food on a plate. “As we have to talk about something you said before pulling Madoc out of there. And I think it’s the reason why he didn’t let you die like he threatened to do.”

“See why I was so worried?” Limbani mumbled around the cock in his mouth.

“Yeah,” Yating said, reluctantly accepting the slice of bread the other rat handed him. “Limbani’s vision means we are getting out of here, so we need to take about Madoc having a son.”

“It’s just something else that kangaroo put in his head,” Madoc said with derision.

“Brought him to—” Thomas grunted and came. He panted as the monkey suck on his cock some more before letting go with a smirk “—to thanksgiving.” He focused on not going full body limp by sipping his coffee. “You came with Ettore and my aunt. They came to tell us they were engaged and you tagged along because other than seeing Pryce, you didn’t want to be there, and you brought him to introduce him to me.”

“Wait.” Limbani stared at Madoc. “One of the guys in your family’s getting married?” he paused and Thomas could see the gears turning. “Like, to a woman?”

“I’ll also point out that Thomas claims I had sex with his sister,” Yating said, looking better.

“It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve had sex with a woman,” Gilbert said.

“Yeah, but I remember meeting his sister when she barged into the house,” the panda said. “I would remember sex with a woman that hot.”

“Would you do that?” Limbani asked, sounding disgusted, as he moved to Yating’s crotch. “There’s plenty of ass to—” He was on his ass, forcefully shoved away by the panda’s foot.

“Grow up, Lim. Everybody’s different. Deal with it.”

“Can we get back on track?” Thomas asked, then put the plate on the armrest and zipped himself up as the monkey eye his crotch again. “I’d like to resolve this and leave.”

“No one here remembers me having a son,” Madoc said, sharing his plate with a now clearly hungry Yating. “So you’re the one whose memories have been altered.”

Thomas closed his eyes, of all the fucking thing to be stuck in. It was his word against Madoc, no all of there’s and he couldn’t—

“Call Ettore,” Thomas said. “He’ll tell you about your son.”

The others looked at one another.

“And if he says Madoc doesn’t have a son?” Gilbert asked.

Thomas closed his mouth on his protest. “Then, I’m going to have to admit I’m the one with the screwed-up memories.” But he wasn’t. He was certain of that.

He looked at the certainty in the other’s eyes.

Oh fuck, he hoped he wasn’t the one with he messed-up memories.

The others confidence wavered when Madoc just looked at his phone. “I don’t have his number,” he finally said.

“You don’t have your cousin’s number?” Thomas asked in disbelief.

“Even with as few of us left as there is, we’re not all interconnected to the point our tails are one big knot.”

“Ohh,” Limbani said, “I could go—”

“Shut up,” Yating admonished the monkey.

“Ettore’s an entirely different generation than me. He was coming back to Minneapolis, so I bummed a ride off him. That I do remember.”

“Then call that Raphael guy,” Thomas said. “You’ve been going on about how I betrayed him, and he’s your elder, that’s got to mean he knows about your son right?”

“You really thing I have the personal number of my family elder?” Madoc asked incredulously.”

“Then call your family contact,” Thomas said. “Fuck call anyone in your family. I don’t care, if you have a son, they’ll know about him right?”

“You should go through your contact,” Yating said. “Thomas is involved in this and Raphael was who tasked you, and us, with getting him back, so once they confirm you don’t have a son, then we can arrange to get Thomas back to him.”

“You’re assuming I’ll be able to speak with him,” Madoc said. “I only got the job because I know Thomas. Raphael has no reason to take my call, no matter what I think.”

“But you don’t have anything to lose by asking, right?” Limbani asked, having seemingly given up getting to any of the exposed cock. “What’s the worse that’ll happen? You get your fucking privilege revoked?”

"Is that a thing?" Thomas asked, the statement catching him by surprise as he was keeping an eye on the monkey suspiciously uninterested behavior.

"No," Madoc said, then he scrolled, frowning slightly before tapping the screen.

"Do you mind putting that on speaker?" Thomas asked. "Seeing as it's my future that's on the line too, I'd like to be able to have a say in what'll happen." He avoided looking at the window to give away he could teleport if it came to it.

"Look, if I do get to speak to him," Madoc said as the phone rang. "Please remember he's your elder too. That means he's entitled to some level of respect."

"You mean the kind of respect you were bad mouthing about him at my grandfathers place?"

Madoc stared at him. "How do you—" the other end answered.

"Madoc," a man answered and Thomas stared at the phone. He knew that voice. "Do you have good news?"

"I have... news," the man said. "I need to speak with Raphael."

"Raphael is a busy man," the man responded. "It's why I'm the one you call when you—"

"Henry?" Thomas asked.

Madoc stared at him in the silence.

"Thomas?" Henry replied.

"You remember Henry?" Madoc asked, shocked.

"Of course I do," Thomas snapped. "He's the one who started all this shit."

"What are you talking about?" Madoc asked over Henry's protest. "Henry's Raphael's right-hand man. He doesn't start shit."

"What did you do to them?" Thomas demanded at the phone.

"Nothing," the man replied, and continued, sounding fatherly. "But how are you? We were all so worried when you ran off like that."

"You mean when you chased me off?"

"I didn't..." Henry paused. "Ah, yes, I might have overreacted to the revelation of what you can do. I do apologize."

"Really?" Thomas replied dryly. "Sending these guys after me only registers as an overreaction?"

"You scared us, Thomas," Henry said. "All we want is for you to come home. Or," he paused. "Considering how you feel, maybe you'd prefer I come meet you. I don't normally leave the grounds, but for you, I'll make an exception."

Madoc's frown kept Thomas from outright accepting. In the pause he remembered a detail. "What have you done to my family?" Only his father knew what bus in was traveling on.

"Why, they're with you, Thomas," the man replied.

"Don't play dumb, Henry," Thomas snapped. "You know fucking well I'm not talking about the frat."

The man sighed. "Your father and brother are fine. More than fine, actually. I'm spending time with both of them. You never said how good they were. Shame on you for not sharing."

Thomas grabbed the phone. "What have you done to them?" he yelled in it.

"Tell me, Thomas, how would you feel about having two new frat brothers?" Henry chuckled. "Your father as your brother, that could be interesting. I wonder if being related to you will change anything in how you act toward them and who will have the most to teach the others by the time you are back."

"Henry," Thomas growled threateningly. "If you even think of touching my family, I will—"

"Now, now, Thomas. There's no need for threats." Henry interrupted him, sounding too calm for Thomas's liking. "I am certainly not threatening anyone. All I'm doing is treating your family with care and attention. Even the women have no reasons to complain." He chuckled. "But it is true, most of my attention is on your father and brother. With them here, the house doesn't feel quite as empty. So I do have to rely on them until you are back. Then, we will all be a very happy family again. So Thomas, please don't make me wait too long."

Thomas's scream covered the moment the call ended and he stared at as the screen returned to the default background. He screamed again as he wound up for a throw, but Yating took it out of his hand and handed it back to Madoc.

"Did that make any sense to you?" Limbani asked as Thomas panted, trying to bring his rage under control.

"Madoc?" Gilbert asked.

The man shook himself. "That can't have been him." He looked at the phone. "I mean, it sounded like

him, but the Henry I've been talking with is in Kansas. I doubt he's ever heard of the UMn."

"He's in charge of the frat," Thomas said, not sounding entirely deranged anymore. "He's a history major."

"He ... didn't deny being the reason Thomas ran off," Yating pointed out while Madoc seemed to be trying to figure out how to respond. "That means he lied to you."

"No, he can't have," Madoc protested. "Raphael was there when Henry told me about Thomas running off. No, Raphael isn't who told me, I told you I don't rate speaking with the elder, but we were in his office. He would never have let Henry lie like that." He frowned. "Unless he's in on it too?"

"Wait," Thomas said, raising a hand to stop anyone from jumping in. "Henry's related to you?"

"Of course," Madoc replied, rolling his eyes.

"There is a bar in your family tree?" Thomas asked slowly, then chuckled at the absurd image of Henry hanging upside down from a branch.

"Of course not," Madoc snapped. "Henry's a rat like us."

Thomas shook his head. "He's a bat."

"He can't be a bat and part of Sigma Theta Gamma," Gilbert said. "There is not bat family within the Society." He looked around. "Right?"

Limbani shrugged.

"Not as far as I know," Madoc said.

"What's Henry family name?" Yating asked as he retrieved his phone.

"Heindrick," Thomas responded as Madoc said.

"Lewiston." Then seemed to fight his exasperation.

Yating tapped his screen, and someone answered as he placed the phone on the coffee table.

"Yat," Olavo said, "please tell me you rescued Madoc."

"Nor that I asked for it," the rat grumbled.

"Olavo," Yating said, "I need to know about the Heindricks."

"The who?" the capybara asked.

"Bat family."

"Then you mean the Stokers," Olavo replied.

Thomas shook his head when the panda glanced at him.

"No, he's a bat called Henry Heindrick."

"There aren't any bat in the Society anymore, Yat. What's going on?"

I'm not sure," Yating said. "Are you certain?"

"Yat, you're heard about the Stokers, right?" the capybara said in exasperation. "The disaster they were? Trust me. If even one of them had survived the clean-up. We would know about it."

"Okay, I'll call you once we know where we're going." The panda ended the call and looked around.

"So..." Limbani trailed off, then continued. "Someone passing themselves off as one of us?"

"If Thomas's memories are correct," Yating said.

"That's still a big if," Gilbert added.

"Is it?" Madoc asked, looking at them. "You heard what Henry said. He has Thomas's brother and father at the frat. I remember them. His dad's kind of intense, and his brother's going to be a hunk when I can —"

"Don't even think about it," Thomas warned. "I told you. Roland's straight."

"I remember the frat," Limbani said. "No Henry, tho. Laurence is the house leader."

Yating looked around. "So, is that Henry the one who did something to our memories?"

"What are the odds some other faction managed to plant someone among us?" Gilbert asked.

"They aren't zero," Yating replied. "And that before we take into account someone with the power to alter our memories."

"Can a guy from another faction keep up with you, us?" Thomas asked. "Henry is just as sexual as everyone in the frat."

"It doesn't matter," Madoc said. "He's either a bat from the Society, which makes him a Stocker, which should be impossible. Or he's someone who infiltrated our frathouse, a Society sanctuary, which means there's a faction trying to hurt up." He paused. "I have to tell Raphael about it."

"Lau is still at the frat," Gilbert said. "Along with everyone else. A lot of elders need to be told."

"Yes," Yating said, "but other than your family, Gil, we have no way to contact any of them. Madoc

doesn't have the number to his elder. So you need to—"

"He can't call anyone," Madoc said. "I thought I was calling my elder's right-hand man. We can't know if anyone we think we can trust are real. We need to do this in person, and my family's the closest."

"Okay, everyone get dressed, grab a snack. We're heading out," Yating said, standing. "We need to bet to Kansas City as soon as possible."

"It's too early," Limbani whined, "and I want Gilbert as my snack."

"We'll hit bad traffic and that's going to put us on track," the armadillo said. "In San Francisco Bay it's basically impossible to get anywhere on time."

"What about my family," Thomas asked as the others went looking for their clothes. "We have to go save them."

"Thomas," Madoc said. "We will save them. But we need help. We're just five university students." He smiled. "And if there's one thing my family's good at, it's kicking ass."

Minutes later they were riding the elevator down.

"I'll check us out," Yating said as the elevator dinged and the doors started to open. "Pick me up in—"

"I don't think so," the massive tiger standing on the other side of the open doors said, crossing his arms over his chest and stretching the fabric of the suit dark gray jacket he wore.

"Dietrich," Madoc said in awe, confirming for Thomas that they were indeed doomed.

Chapter 33

[everything before the scene change will be moved to the previous chapter]

“Yes, Dietrich Orr,” the tiger stated, a growl in his voice. “And if you think you get to barge into my city and I’ll let you leave without explaining yourselves, you’re going to be sorely disappointed.”

“How did you know this is where we were?” Gilbert asked, then swallowed as the tiger narrowed his eyes. “Sir.”

The stripped wall of muscle rolled his eyes. “I had you followed. Unlike those nephews of mine, I’m not an idiot. As satisfying as grabbing the two of you and shaking you until you told me everything, I’m not looking to start a war. Now, you have two choices. We go to the conference room I rented and you convince me to let you go, or you can pull the disappearing act you did in the warehouse and I have to explain to my nephews while I had to go and piss off the Society when I catch up to you.”

“I’ll go anywhere with you,” Madoc said.

“Not again,” Thomas grumbled as the tiger smirked. “Can we make this quick?” the rat pointed to the other rat. “He needs to talk to his elder about a bad and his son, so we can then go and rescue my family. It’s been a busy hour when we ran from you.”

Dietrich raised an eyebrow. “You don’t seem as scared of me as they are.” Thomas thought there was a definite ‘as you should be’ unmentioned there.

“Oh, I’m plenty scared.” He motioned up and down the tiger. “You can probably crush this elevator with us in it, and they’ve made it clear how infamously violent your family is. But someone just threatened *my* family. And I’m discovering that worrying about them is causing my fear of you to be stupidly manageable. Where’s that conference room?” Before any of his friends could complain, he added. “Tell me you have something to drink.”

“Are you even legal to drink?” the tiger asked.

* * * * *

San Francisco, CA, February 15th

The meeting with Dietrich was simpler than Thomas expected. They explained about Madoc’s kidnapping and the steps they’d taken to find him. Thomas substituted Limbani’s precognitive ability so he wouldn’t have to explain about Shila; nondisclosure was ironclad in their deal. The tiger had listened, then taken Madoc aside for a conversation long enough, Thomas figured they’d fucked.

Once they returned, Dietrich wished them good luck, and left them there, stunned.

Without having to rush, but still being in a hurry, Yating suggested they charge up Thomas and that he could teleport them to Denver. The rat had been quick to point out the glaring flaw in that plan. He didn’t have a landing spot in the city. Living on the street hadn’t led to him creating the kind of safe environment he kept going back to enough to become familiar with it.

Gilbert pointed out his own problem with the panda’s plan. He wasn’t leaving his van behind, and, as far as he knew, Thomas hadn’t developed the ability to take more than one person with him.

During the entire exchange, Limbani had barely been able to keep from smirking in satisfaction.

The reason became apparent when, the next day, when the monkey joyfully pointed out that they were now exactly where and when he had seen them two days before.

* * * * *

Denver, CO, February 18th

The capybara, otter and squirrel had been waiting for them at the steps of the Marriot Tech Center as they had pulled in, but Gilbert was too tired to continue, and despite Thomas’s insistence, he still wouldn’t let anyone drive his van.

Seeing Donal again, and in good health, had taken some of the annoyance away and they’d spent the night at the hotel.

Late the next morning, Olavo, Donal and Felix had started the ride in the otter’s car, and every hour they stopped for the passengers to switch from the car to the van so they could enjoy the others. The only ones

not to move vehicles were Thomas, he had to stay in the van, and Donal, who had to remain in the car.

Thomas had pointed out there was no need, that he'd had plenty of chances for him to leave with Donal when they were at the hotel, but Olavo wouldn't hear of it. He wasn't risking Thomas deciding to teleport away again, and leaving the others hanging. He needed to touch the squirrel to take him along, so he wasn't given a chance to touch him.

* * * * *

Kansas City, KS, February 19th

"Another Marriott?" Thomas asked, looking at the colorful front as Gilbert stopped the van.

"Where else did you think we were going to go?" Olavo asked from the back with a satisfied sigh as he pulled out of the red panda.

"Our Family owns the chain," Madoc said, holding down Limbani's head on his cock. "That's why they were staying there in San Francisco Bay. We have an arrangement with most Society families. And we have to be here since we want to talk with Raphael. This is where our family is based out of."

"Lots of sex," the monkey said around the rat's cock.

Thomas raised an eyebrow at Madoc.

"We make sure a high number of the male staff in our hotels are willing to have sex with other men," the rat answered. "You can't just grab a random guy in the hotel uniform, but a Society man traveling alone can order room servicing."

Thomas looked away as the implications hit. "So, those hotels are like whorehouses?"

Madoc rolled his eyes.

Gilbert chuckled. "Don't let another Lewiston hear you call it that."

"We don't sell the guys' services," Madoc said. "And the service is only available to Society men. Not all of us have the luxury of traveling with friends." He gave a hard thrust, holding Limbani in place.

"How long until Felix gets here?" Thomas asked, eyeing the monkey's raised ass.

Gilbert tapped the screen on the dash, tapped it again and on the third try, a menu came up, and another tap brought a map with another marker on it. It was zoomed in enough that Thomas figured he'd have to wait on the offered ass before the armadillo said.

Less than five minutes.

The otter had only spent any of the stops in the van long enough to fuck. Unlike Gilbert, he wasn't as picky as to whom could drive his car, but if he and Thomas weren't busy, they couldn't stop arguing.

Felix had always been full of himself, and not in an endearing way, but when catching up with him, his usual looking down on Thomas for being beneath him came with accusations of disrespecting him and his family. Thomas had tried to explain those weren't things that had happened, but the otter wouldn't hear of it, and Thomas had no patience for the baseless accusation with worrying about his family.

So the otter had driven the entire way, the last leg with only Donal for company.

The silver luxury San Sortuna stopped next to the van and Gilbert lowered the window with fewer difficulties than Thomas had seen in San Francisco. The armadillo had spent whatever time not busy with the rescue pattering around his van. He was going to fix it completely; he kept insisting.

"What are we doing with him?" Felix asked, leaning over the passenger side and motioning to the back.

Olavo leaned over Gilbert. "One of us can stay with him in the lobby."

"I'm not doing it," the otter stated.

"I don't need a babysitter," the squirrel said. "I'm a grown-ass adult."

"You okay?" Thomas asked over the capybara.

"I'm good." Donal sighed. "But someone need to take Felix had have sex with him. He's been eyeing me for the last ten miles and my ass needs a rest."

"I'm sorry, Donal," Olavo replied, "but I can't risk you running off."

"Where the fuck am I going to go?" the squirrel asked in exasperation. "All I have is what I'm wearing, and that's only half of what you forced me to leave behind. I don't know this city's streets."

"Just think of it as more of our hospitality," the capybara said.

"Then, whoever does it better be willing to walk," Donal grumbled. "I am fed up with being cooped up."

"We'll figure out that part once we're inside the hotel." Olavo then instructed Gilbert to drive them to the underground parking.

* * * * *

Kansas City, KS, February 19th

The rat seated behind the sleek metal desk looked them over. The suit was rumbled, as if he'd been awake in it for days. He looked tired, but that didn't keep the annoyance from showing.

"Alright," he demanded. "So, who exactly are you?"

Reaching the... infamous?... Raphael hadn't been a straight line.

* * * * *

Kansas City, KS, February 19th

Madoc had spoken with the hotel manager, who had brought in a man, another rat, who had made a series of calls on getting their identities. Then had come another rat, who questioned them about how they'd come to be there.

They'd wanted to keep the story to Madoc's kidnapping and rescue, but they didn't mention Dietrich. Thomas' kidnapped family was included. Then he had to explain how the two weren't related, so he's explained about his teleportation, running from the frat.

The entire story only got him an eye roll and a 'just who are you again?', glare.

When a fourth rat showed up and asked for details about Madoc's kidnapping, Thomas snapped. He teleported in his face, told them they were here to see Raphael, then teleported back to his chair.

That has sped things up immensely.

* * * * *

Kansas City, KS, February 19th

"I'm Madoc, sir. I was Glynn's son." He named the others as he pointed to them, including the family names. He finished with Thomas and stumbled over Hertz.

"And you are all part of the same chapter of Sigma Theta Gamma?" the elder rat asked.

"Yes, sir."

Raphael looked at Thomas. "And you claim to be one of us, and to be able to teleport." This wasn't a question, but a statement of dubiousness.

"I don't claim anything," Thomas said and added, catching Madoc's wince, "sir. I was told I'm one of you because of how getting fucked gave me this power."

"Teleportation." The dubiousness of the claim was even heavier this time.

"Why don't you ask the guy I did it in front of?" Thomas asked. "If you won't trust him, give me a door with a window in it and I'll show you."

"Why a window?" Raphael asked, the dubiousness this there, but now with a hint of, 'okay, how far is he going to push this stupid claim?' Added in.

"I need to see where I'm going," Thomas answered. "At least to use it safely. Anything else's left me drained to the point others have been scared I was dying. Until I was fucked."

Raphael considered him, then tapped his desk. "Dirk." A minute later, a rat entered. "That door," the elder said, indicating the one on the other side of the room. Dirk placed a hand on it and it became transparent, showing a bedroom on the other side. "Well?"

Thomas teleported into the room. The bed was unmade, clothing piled in a corner. There was a definite smell of sex, but also of unwashed bodies. Whoever used this room didn't have much time to take care of it or himself. When he looked out the clear door, Raphael stared at him before motioning for him to return. Thomas reappeared next to Madoc.

The elder studied images on his desk. Thomas couldn't make them out, but he figured he knew what they were. When he looked up, he seemed re-energized.

"You actually teleported," he said, the awe barely contained. "I was thinking you'd pulled some trick, hyper speed or something. Teleportation's supposed to be impossible." A smile formed. "And you're one of mine."

"I'm a Hertz," Thomas stated. "As far as we've worked out, the only link I share with your family is that my grandmother's sister married into it."

Raphael waved that aside. "We'll work out how that happened later. Now, you told Vincent that your memories have been altered by a bat."

"Theirs," Thomas said.

"Maybe," Madoc replied, glaring at Thomas. "We don't know which of us had their memories altered for certain. Thomas was in the company of a kangaroo who did magic."

"Only of the Longner?" Raphael asked.

"Not one of us," Madoc said, then looked at Thomas.

He sighed. "His last name is Summer. I'm not giving you his first. He saved me and I'm not taking a chance that you'll decide to make his life more difficult."

"What faction is he from?" the elder asked, tone stern.

Thomas shrugged, remembering Grant's warning about mentioning Practitioners to anyone else. "I don't know any of that stuff." He paused. "Sir."

"He had a staff, and called down lightning," Madoc said.

"A staff?" Raphael asked, and ear tilting in quizzicalness. "What did it look like?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Madoc said after thinking it over. "Yating is the only one who got close enough to see it."

"Yating Xu," Raphael read on his desk. "The one you left with this Donal, and who are now walking about the city, correct?" there was incredulity in his voice. "He really should be here, since he had important information."

"I didn't know the staff was important, sir," Madoc said defensively.

"It might not be. The point is that you should all have been here." The elder calmed himself. "Now, about this bat, what faction is he from?"

"If I may, sir?" Olavo asked, and once the elder nodded, continued. "He's Society."

"There are no bat families, Mister Medeiros," the elder replied with a touch more respect than he'd afforded even Madoc.

"I know, sir," Olavo responded. "But I've been going over everything, and it's the only way any of this works."

Raphael sighed, but motioned for the copybara to continue.

"It's been bugging me how Thomas can be a founding, because the only way he can have been initiated by the frat is if thirteen already initiated Society members had sex with him for all three of them. A case can be made that we had a visitor who didn't announce himself the first time because it was an open party, but the other two only involved the frat, and there's only twelve of us. Unless you add this Henry." Olavo ran a hand over his face. "The one other possibility I was entertaining was that Thomas was a Lewiston who had his memories altered before meeting us. But if that was the case, you'd have known who he is. Am I right in thinking you had our DNA checked to rule out any Body Thieves?"

The elder nodded.

"It means that there were thirteen of us at the frat, and Henry is one of us, sir."

"There has only ever been one bat family, Mister Medeiros," Raphael said. "They were wiped out."

"Yes, sir," Olavo replied. "And yet, the evidence we have points to him being a Stoker."

"Cursed Ass. I don't need this." The elder rested his head in his hands. "And not one of you remembers him?"

"I do," Thomas said, then added. "Sir."

"Will you stop it with the sir, if you aren't comfortable with it?" Raphael snapped. He tapped the desk. "Dirk."

"Yes, sir," the rat replied from next to the door, which was now opaque again.

"Pull a team together. Have them investigate the Minneapolis Chapter of Sigma Theta Gamma. Discreetly, Dirk," he added. "I don't need that to get to the ears of the Richard, is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

Raphael closed his eyes. "Tell me someone recently initiated has come out with mind reading powers."

When Dirk didn't immediately answer, Thomas glanced in the rat's direction. He was reading from his phone.

"No, sir," he said, putting it away.

Raphael cursed under his breath. "Don't the Mercier have one?"

"I'd have to check with them, sir."

"Do that. If needed, mention the frat since they have two boys in it. It should keep their demands to something reasonable."

"Sir?" Thomas said, turning the word into a question at the last moment and then snapping his muzzle close until the elder nodded to him. "I don't know why you need a mind reader. We're established

they're the ones with the scr—altered memories. Madoc said you'd help rescue my family. Henry had them. We need to go right now."

The older rat watched Thomas, and his expression softened. "Dirk. Make sure they look into that, too. If there is a way to do it without making waves, arrange the rescue. Otherwise, have them bring he intel so we make plans." He raised a hand as Thomas opened his muzzle. "Thomas, I can't let you go."

"But," Thomas protested.

"How long did you stay at the frat?" Raphael asked.

Thomas ran a hand through his headfur, barely able to contain his irritation at the lack of action. "Since September, but that's got nothing to do with any of this."

"So, for around five months," Raphael said, "you lived with someone able to alter memories."

Thomas shrugged. "I guess, but he didn't do anything to me."

"How do you know?"

Thomas opened his mouth, but no words came out.

Of course, his memory was fine. He'd know if Henry had done anything to them. He was sure of that, and the bat hadn't.

He glanced at Madoc, Felix, Gilbert and Olavo.

Just like they were certain their memories were fine too, until confronted with evidence to the contrary they couldn't deny.

Chapter 34

Kansas City, KS, February 23th

Thomas cracked the bathroom door and immediately forgot he was hiding from a stalking monkey as the acrid smell of something burning seeped through. Hopefully, Limbani was busy with one of the others, because this was more important.

He made it to the kitchen as Donal put the lid over a pan, cutting off the flames.

“What were you thinking?” Yating yelled, shoving the armadillo in a chair by the table.

On the counter, far too close to the stove, were household cleaners, some metal scrubbing pads, a half melted spatula, and plates containing material Thomas couldn't identify.

“I'm bored,” Gilbert replied, slouching. “There's no lab for me to go to and pass the time.”

“I thought you guys have sex when you get bored,” Donal said. He inched the cover off and black smoke escaped. He covered it, coughing.

“I think that gives you an indication of just how bored he is,” Thomas said, “that sex isn't helping anymore.”

“Can I pour water over this stuff?” the squirrel asked.

“Should be,” Gilbert replied, then sighed melancholically. “There's nothing in here that's reactive to Oxygen or hydrogen.”

Donal looked at the armadillo, the pan, then stepped away. “You know what, you guys can deal with this.” He walked by Thomas, who watched the panda pull the armadillo out of the chair and set him to clean.

Thomas understood how Gilbert felt.

Four days shouldn't be this boring. Not with the guys around. But the only one of them who seemed to be okay with being confined to this house was Donal, who fiddle with his... project. It had now gained part of a toy car, which the squirrel had found during his walk around the city while Thomas and the others were being debriefed. He had wedged it between the bent penny and what might have been the key to an ancient lock.

Thomas walked around the well-appointed house, wondering if he should let Limbani find him. Getting fucked was approaching the ‘why was he bothering’ point—and that felt like blasphemy to him—but it was something to do, or have done to him. There was no risk he'd burn down the house if he got too bored, but he was starting to think about the moon as a place to try to teleport too, he could see it after all and that had to mean it wouldn't exhaust him.

Right?

Thomas hadn't expected to be put up in an actual house when Raphael said they'd be waiting in a safe house. Too many movies had taught him that safe house was just code for a dingy motel room on the outskirts of a city where, within five minutes of arriving, the bad guys found those hiding there.

Hadn't Raphael been the bad guy before they came to Kansas City? Did that mean they'd been caught before they were put in the safe house? Was that a record of some sort?

How long would it have taken Gilbert to come up with a way to burn down the motel if the seven of them had been confined to a motel room? How long until he and Felix were strangling each other? There was a limit to how beneficial angry sex was, right?

Limbani's moans came through the door as he walked by, followed by a scream for Felix to fuck him harder, to fuck him like he actually meant it.

What was behind that door? It wasn't the garage or one of the bedrooms. Thomas had been fucked in it by the monkey, he was sure of that, but he hadn't actually taken in the room itself. A storage closet?

Within minutes of being deposited in the house, with orders not to leave it, Limbani had explored all of it and returned with a grin. Before lunch, he'd had sex in every room in the large house. That meant three bedrooms, two bathrooms, the kitchen, the dining room, the garage, the unfinished basement, and that room Felix was fucking him in right now.

The Laundry room, that was the one.

As soon as lunch was over, the monkey announced he was going to have sex with everyone in the house, in each of the rooms. What the monkey hadn't mentioned at the time was that he would do all he could

to be seen by someone outside of the house, plastering his partner of choice against a window anywhere one of them was accessible. The living room one had lines of cum all over it.

There had been an argument over leaving that there, with the monkey defending the proof of his actions with a 'no one but us is in here and you don't need to use it to get any of of to fuck you'. Olavo had replied in Spanish and the monkey had pushed him against the window and fucked him.

Thomas suspected Raphael had consulted a precognitive before assigning them the house. It was the only reason it had come with high privacy fences all around it.

That, or the monkey was less of the exception Thomas believed him to be when it came to shoving his cock in the outside world's face than he'd expected.

He made it up the stairs as Olavo exited the master bedroom naked, hard and wiping cum off the side of his mouth with a finger.

"What's the smell?" the capybara asked.

"Gilbert's boredom. He decided to play chemistry set with whatever he found under the sink, and possibly some stuff from the garage. If you know of anything in those places that can create fumes that will kill us, I'd like to know."

"Economy Major here," Olavo said, "not Chemistry. But don't worry, if you start feeling lightheaded, or sick, I'll fuck it right out of you."

Thomas opened his mouth to tell the capybara that wasn't a thing and closed it, because, in his case, it was. Somehow, the idea Olavo could heal someone by fucking them was more difficult to accept than Gilbert forming a candle flame in the palm of his hand, or Yating walking through a wall.

"How is he?" Thomas asked, motioning to the door.

"He's..." the capybara shrugged.

If Donal was the one least affected by their situation, Madoc was the one most affected by it, but in his case, it wasn't being stuck in the house. It was Raphael confirming that Madoc indeed had a son. The news had sent him into a depressive state deep enough he hadn't initiated sex in the four days they'd been here.

"I'm going to keep him company," Thomas said, reaching for the door.

"If you need me," Olavo replied, swatting the rat's ass, "you know where to find me."

If he wasn't having sex, Olavo was at the computer playing poker against strangers. Under other circumstances, Thomas would wonder if he was addicted, but it was just how he dealt with boredom. Limbani fucked, Felix bitched, Yating read, Gilbert worked on his doctorate. At least that was what Thomas had thought until the kitchen incident. Maybe what he'd been doing was researching which household product was easiest to turn into an explosive.

And Donal had his... even project felt wrong. It was certainly not a toy, like Felix loved to call it. The squirrel took too much care with where he put whichever item he found and added to it. Thomas had thought it was a way for him to cope with being homeless, his version of piling possessions in a shopping cart and dragging it everywhere. But now? He wasn't obsessive about it, just meticulous.

That reminded Thomas, again, that he had to find out if the squirrel had somewhere to go back to when this was over. Somewhere real, a family, a home.

Thomas entered the bedroom, and at least temporarily, his wandering was over. He couldn't seem to sit still in the house. He couldn't decide if it was because he'd been on the run for more than a month now, his weeks living on the street, an eagerness to go save his family, or just plain utter boredom.

One thing that it wasn't, he kept telling himself, was fear of Limbani dragging him down to the basement as the last place left in the house where the two of them hadn't fucked. Thomas had no problems with basements. He'd been fucked by thirteen guys in one, so that was fine.

Of course, that room hadn't been the dingy affair this basement was. Thomas shuddered at the memory of going down those steps, the humid, moldy smell, the darker patch on the wall that he couldn't explain away by the shadow the anemic bulb cast.

"Hey," Thomas greeted the muscular rat seated in the plush chair by the window. It was turned toward the bed, something one of them had done the first time they'd had to pull Madoc out to have sex. He was naked, as usual, but flaccid, which struck Thomas as wrong. Sure, the rat wasn't always hard, but another naked guy was usually all it took.

Madoc barely looked at him. Thomas wouldn't be surprised to find out that was the position he'd been in while Olavo sucked him off.

"It just occurred to me," Thomas said as he sat on the edge of the bed. "But this is your city. Doesn't that mean you have a house here?"

The rat shook his head.

“Really? Come on, your family has to have a house around here, the hotel can’t be it. The way you’re all having sex, it’s going to be one large place where you can all—”

“My family’s dead,” Madoc snapped. “And if you have to know. My home is in Denver. Not in this forsaken hell hole Raphael moved us to just so he wouldn’t have to deal with that cheetah.”

“Cheetah?” Thomas asked, raiding his hands defensively at the glare now directed at him. “I’m sorry. I meant the Lewistons as a whole, not... you know. But in my defense, we have different memories of how things are.” None of his included Madoc having explained he lived in Denver before.

“I so can’t wait for that Mercier mind reader to get here and fix all of this,” Madoc said angrily.

They had been informed, when a resupply of food had been brought the day before, that the Mercier had agreed to lend Raphael their mind reader, but that it would be awhile before he’d be in Kansas.

Olavo had explained, once Raphael’s man had left, that meant they were still arguing over how got the better end of the deal. Elders never stopped playing politics, he’d added bitterly.

“Until he does get here, do you mind explaining?” Thomas asked. “I don’t remember Denver ever coming up before.”

“I—” Madoc snapped his muzzle close and rubbed his face. He sounded calmer when he spoke again. “A few years ago, this cheetah comes out of nowhere. Something about him being the last surviving member of a family they thought was dead. He shoved his cock in Denver politics, sucked off the Cormorans to the point they did whatever he said.” He ground his teeth. “He told them to kick my family out.” He closed his eyes. “Only months after we lost nearly everyone to some crazy killer who that guy’s family pissed off.” He said, biting each word.

“And Raphael, coward that he is, went along with it instead of fighting for my ancestral home!” he swallowed and wiped tears from his eyes. “Alistair would never have tucked tail like that. He was the elder,” Madoc said before Thomas could ask, “before Raphael. He was a casualty of that killer. Just like my father, three brothers, more cousins than I can count.”

When he continued, he sounded tired. “But it’s not just that. I can’t even go back and see the places I lived. Raphael went and pissed that cheetah off to the point where if one of us sets foot home, we get arrested on sight, charged with something stupid, then sent back here with a record.”

Thomas swallowed. “Someone can do that?” A cheetah had done that?

Madoc shrugged. “Money gives power. We all use it, but we’re not supposed to use it against each other. We have enough fucking problems without turning against our own.”

What were the odds that cheetah was some other one and not the Denton Brislow he’d sought, after Grant’s contact had said not to. They had said there was something between that guy and the Lewistons, and what Madoc had described definitely qualified as something.

Was that why they’d tried to capture him?

He thought about telling the other rat understood how he felt. After all, he too had been chased out of his home and he had to seek refuge somewhere he’d rather not be, while other people decided what would happen to him and his home.

Then he remembered who had been chasing him across the north of Central US, and that being on the run for a bit really was not like losing your ancestral home, and that he still had his entire family waiting for him once this was over.

Yeah, Thomas wasn’t going there and making this about himself. He’d come here to check in on the rat and raise his spirit. He looked at the soft cock and wondered if there was anything he could do in Madoc’s current state to change that, then remembered something about his frat brother.

It was possible his memory couldn’t be trusted, but he was confident this had happened to him when he was depressed. He stood and went to the rat. He ran a hand along Madoc’s arm as he leaned in.

“Thomas,” the rat said tiredly, “I’m not in—”

“Don’t you think I look thin?” Thomas whispered into Madoc’s ear.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” the rat said with a sigh.

Thomas ran a hand over the sculpted biceps. “I was on my back, on the altar in the frat’s basement, the first time you said I should have more mass. When you saw the pictures of my brother Judith send Yating, you dragged my tail to the gym because you felt I was wasting my genetic potential.” He ran his other hand down the chiseled chest, then abs, and caressed along the Adonis belt. “When I came back after spending nearly a week of winter-break in the hospital, I made a surprisingly quick recovery, thanks to someone’s secret training supplements.”

Madoc chuckled, then let Thomas pull him up and guide him to the bed, where he laid him on his stomach. Thomas stretched next to him, running a hand along the Trapezius.

“You’re always saying you’re going to make me into the next Mister Universe,” Thomas said, “but I think you’re aiming to get there too.”

Madoc laughed. “I thought you said you weren’t interested.”

“I’m glad we remember that the same way.” Thomas pulled the rat on his side and pressed against his back, hands roaming over his pectorals. “But I thought all that work you were doing on me was so you could get in my straight brother’s pants.” Madoc snorted, and Thomas ignored it was times for right after he said straight. “I didn’t realize your goal was to fuck me into perfection.” He nuzzled the back of the rat’s neck. “That’s the kind of workout instructor I’d happily bend over for.”

“You do know you’d still have to work out, right?”

“Really?” Thomas asked, licking along the side. “no free drinks from the tap?” he gently ran a claw over a nibble.

Madoc inhaled sharply. “It’s about momentum,” he said, breathing heavily. “My power is separate from the workout, so if you do that on top of me buffing you, you get even bigger.”

“So,” Thomas said as he rolled Madoc onto his back. “If we want to fix all the atrophy I suffered from being on the run and living on the street, we’re going to have to find a gym.” He crawled over the rat and nibbled on a nipple. “Do you think they’ll let us use their sauna for your intended purposes?” Thomas asked mischievously.

Madoc gasped, and Thomas felt the cock under him stiffen. Before he could find his breath to answer, the door burst open.

“There you’re hiding!” Limbani yelled. He froze, looking at them, stunned. “Why are the two of you wasting time with foreplay?”

Thomas sighed, annoyance and disappointment fighting for dominance until a new idea popped into his head. “Okay, forget me and Mister Universe. What would it take to turn Limbani into a gorilla?”

Madoc frowned, studying the monkey who was still looking at them as his the lack of fucking had derailed his brain. “I don’t know. We would have do to something about the tail.”

They dragged the still confused monkey to the bed, which was about the most resistance Thomas had ever seen from him when it came to sex, but once the fucking started, Limbani went right back to his usual, overeager self.

Chapter 35

Kansas City, KS, February 25th

Thomas stepped away from the door as it opened the moment he reached for the handle, worried someone had found out he intended to go outside even if they'd been ordered to stay in. He needed a break from the others, from everyone, and he'd figured that no one could complain if he stayed inside the yard where no one could see him over the high privacy fence.

The rat in the blazer looked as surprised to see Thomas at the door, but it was the boy in the man's arm who had all of his attention.

"Hello," the man greeted him, "I'm Trevor. You must be Thomas. This is—"

"Pryce," Thomas answered. "We've met." He looked forward and smiled at the boy. "Hello buddy, are you here to see your daddy?"

"Daddy!" the boy replied, extending his arm toward Thomas.

"No," Thomas said, and before his imagination could go down the hole of Pryce being his, Madoc spoke.

"What's going on?" The muscular rat stood behind Thomas, just to the side, and Pryce would have seen him from Trevor's arms, Thomas realized, and started breathing again.

"Hey Madoc," Trevor said. "Heard you were in town but never dropped by to see your son. When I found out about the house arrest, I figured I'd bring him to you." He stepped toward Madoc and Thomas closed the door.

Madoc simply stared, looking lost, as Trevor offered him Pryce.

Limbani walked in and squealed in delight at seeing the young rat, then he was next to him, making faces. "Who's the cutie?" he asked. Unbothered that Pryce was ignoring him, arms still outstretched toward Madoc.

"Aren't you going to take him?" Trevor asked.

Madoc hesitated, then took him, holding him like he was some oddity, searching Pryce's for... Thomas wasn't sure what.

Pryce, for his part, giggled, grabbed onto Madoc's whiskers and started chewing on them. When Madoc looked up, he started handing the boy back to Trevor, only to wince as Pryce didn't let go of his whiskers.

The knock at the door stopped Madoc from saying anything.

"Are we expecting anyone else?" Thomas asked, pausing his hand nearly at the handle.

"Yes," Trevor answered, then looked uncomfortable. "Also, sorry about this."

Wondering what that might be about, Thomas opened the door. On the other side, a badger looked at him; looked him over.

"I'm Samuel Mercier. Yes, that's exactly who I am," he added as Thomas stared, still processing the name, the family and that a telepath would eventually— "mind moving? You can move and think, right? And yes, I can hear that you're working out I'm the mind reader from my last name."

Shaking himself, Thomas stepped out of the way, the last chain of thoughts coming together as the badger said them, and the implication.

"Yes, I answered before you said anything." Samuel stepped inside. "I find that it saves time." He turned to Madoc and looked the naked rat over, too. "Don't blame Trevor, I'm the one who engineered this encounter. No, that is really Pryce, and he is your son. My job isn't to tell if you're faking it. This is so I can get a sense of how deep the mental alterations go. Of everyone in this house, you're the only one with an emotional trigger I could get my hand— that I could bring to without having to also explain what was going on his father." He raised a hand to stop Madoc from speaking. "No, you're not the only one with altered memories. Yes, all of you have been affected. No, I can't tell how extensive it is, except for Madoc. Yes, Thomas, you too," he added without looking back and sounding slightly exasperated.

Thomas closed his mouth. This was—

"Yes, I know how annoying this gets," Samuel said, grinning at him. "That's half the fun and—" a car door closed. "—that's going to be Ettore. We're going to need an office. One of the unused bedroom will do

fine.”

Ettore stopped in the open doorway, and Thomas nearly closed it in his face at the reminder he was still holding it open.

Samuel snickered.

Ettore looked from Thomas, to Samuel and Trevor, then to the naked guys gathering in the living room before returning to Thomas. “Going somewhere?”

“I was going out for some fresh air,” Thomas said, “but Trevor was there with Pryce, then there was Samuel, who put on something of a mind reading show.”

“I got in early,” Samuel said as Ettore frowned. “I called your elder and arrange for Trevor to pick me up with Pryce.”

“He likes doing that,” Thomas said as his quizzicalness turning into annoyance.

“I’m not going to stop,” Samuel said. “No, I’m not going to be your mouthpiece. Can you imagine? Me bothering to say all the things you’re thinking right now?” he tilted and ear, looked at Thomas. “You really want me to say that?”

The glare Ettore gave the badger had him grinning. “Second floor, first door on the left.”

Ettore sighed. “Madoc, Thomas, if you’ll come with us. I was hoping to have the time to explain how things were going to proceed, but it seems we’re going to have to jump right in.

* * * * *

Kansas City, KS, February 25th

Thomas rubbed his head as he exited the bedroom. That had been the longest three hours of his life. He’d had to go over the entirety of Thanksgiving Dinner, along with Madoc and Ettore, with the older rat as a reference point since his memories hadn’t been altered. Then Thomas, or Ettore, must have thought about Christmas, because Samuel demanded Thomas recount that, with Ettore against acting as a reference. Then he’d sat through Madoc recounting events he and Ettore had shared.

That had included a lot more about his new uncle’s sex life than Thomas felt comfortable knowing. How either of the men could have talked about some of what they’d done together so casually, and in the presence of Pryce, Thomas had no idea.

Thomas froze as he turned to the stair. Limbani stood there, looking down warily. The monkey noticed him and whispered. “There’s a woman down there.”

Thomas strained to listen, but didn’t hear anything. The door to the bedroom opened, Samuel leading the others out, and Thomas went downstairs.

In the center of the living room stood the woman that had Limbani cowering upstairs. She was a full figure red panda, which made her related to Yating, who sat in a chair looking beaten.

“Finally,” Felix said to Ettore, standing. “Tell that woman to leave. She has no business being here, let alone telling us what to do.”

“Which one of you is Thomas?” She asked, her accent on the thick side.

“Mother,” Yating whispered, “we are guest.”

“And poorly treated ones at that,” she replied in the kind of tone his grandmother used when she didn’t like how she was being treated.

“Miss Guan?” Samuel asked.

“Oh, now you won’t read minds?” Ettore muttered.

The badger smirked. “I’m Samuel Mercier. I’m the one who asked for you to come.”

“I was told my son was in trouble,” she replied, eyebrow raised, “so I came to see him. No one asked that I come, young man.”

The smirk vanished from Samuel and appeared on Ettore.

“Now,” she said, “which one of you is Thomas?”

“I’m Thomas,” he answered, unsure where this was going.

“I am told you know how to cook.”

“Well...” his objection trailed off as he remembered who was in the room and what even their best attempt at cooking looked like. “Yes, I can cook.”

“That is good. I will need you to—”

“Actually, I’ll take care of the food,” Ettore said. “Thomas should stay here.”

She looked the man over, and Thomas was amazed that someone actually looked another person over without mentally undressing them. Well, imagining what they could get up to, since his frat brothers were

still naked.

"That is acceptable," she finally said. "Thank you."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Felix complained, storming up the stairs. "Tell me when she's gone and you can start thinking for yourselves!" he yelled as he vanished.

"Ignore him," Thomas said, offering his hand to her. "I'm Thomas, you're Yating's mother?"

She shook it. "Ru Guan."

The tension had lowered with the otter leaving, but it wasn't gone, and Thomas didn't think it was Felix's behavior that had rendered Yating shell-shocked. "So, it looks like I miss a bombshell."

"I have a twin brother," the red panda whispered, then fell silent. He came back to himself after a few seconds. "According to my mother, he's in America, too. We came to study together rather than be separated." He looked at Thomas. "Do you remember me having a brother?" There was a mix of hope and fear in Yating's voice.

"No," Thomas replied, shocked. "You never talked about your family."

"What about me?" Gilbert asked. "Do I have any relatives I don't remember?"

Thomas searched his memory. "You have a brother who's going to be in the NFL."

"I remember him," Gilbert snapped. "I mean anyone else."

"How would I know?" Thomas asked in exasperation. "It's not like you guys told me every little detail of your lives. We're frat brothers and fuck buddies." He realized Yating's mother was next to him and his ears burned, but she didn't comment or even look at him sideways. "When I asked Yating why he wasn't going home for winter break, he said he had 'family issues' and I didn't push, just like I didn't for Firmin when he told me basically the same thing.

Samuel frowned. "Okay, Thomas, I need you to—"

Trevor's phone rang at the same time as one in the kitchen, and all eyes went to the rat in their presence.

"They're sure?" Trevor said after listening. "Okay. Let me wrap up here and we'll be on our way. Have everything ready so we can take off as soon as we arrive." He put the phone away. "Me and Ettore have to leave. Sam—"

"I'll Share-Ride my way," the badger replied. "You go and rescue everyone in Minneapolis."

"You're going home?" Thomas asked, hopeful. "Can I come?"

Trevor glared at the badger, who just smiled. "No, Thomas, you can't come. This is a mission. The prelim team just sent in their report and there enough there to warrant action." He rounded on the badger, who already had his hands up.

"Not one word," Samuel said, "not why I'm here. Got it."

"But I can help," Thomas said. "I know the area and I can teleport."

"It takes more than a good power to be useful in the field, Thomas," Ettore said as he exited the kitchen and Trevor looked at the young rat in disbelief. "A lot of mistakes were made that way when we were scrambling to refill our frontline ranks in the wake of the slaughter."

Trevor looked at Samuel, ear tilted and nodding to Thomas. The badger nodded.

Ettore stopped before Trevor and saluted. "Ready to move out, sir."

Thomas stared in surprise. Trevor looked to be no more than thirty, at least ten years younger than Ettore, and he outranked him? He stared at his new uncle. What was he doing going on that mission? All he did was troubleshoot hotel problems.

Did his aunt know her fiancée was a secret agent?

Trevor motioned for Ettore to head out and faced Thomas. "I know this isn't going to help since you want to act now, and not later, but you can be sure that Raphael will see to it you are field ready as soon as possible."

"Trevor?" Madoc called as the other rat turned to leave. He held up Pryce. "What am I supposed to do with... him?"

"You take care of him," Ru said authoritatively, before Trevor could reply. "That is what a father does."

"With all due respect," Olavo began, only to snap his muzzle shut as she fixed her gaze on him.

"She's your mother," Gilbert whispered to Yating. "Do something."

"I am," the panda replied, sounding more like himself. "I do what my mother tells me."

"As a good boy does," she said, clasping her hands before her.

Trevor gave Madoc a comforting smile, then left the younger rat holding the boy, looking utterly lost as to what to do with him.

Chapter 36

Kansas City, KS, February 26th

“Coming through!” Thomas yelled as he ran after Pryce, and the armadillo plastered himself against the wall an instant before the rat had to shoulder him aside.

How was the kid so damned fast? Thomas was who could teleport, and, somehow, Madoc’s son was the one who kept vanishing on them the moment they turned their back on him. Someone had lied to him about powers just coming in once they were eighteen.

Thomas made it up the stairs with Pryce already halfway down the hall, running under the last step of the ladder leading up to the attic. The otter slowly coming down it only registered as Thomas reached to send the ladder back up as he ran around it, and slapped Felix’s calf totally by accident.

“Fucking watch it,” the otter yelled, and if not for the dusty end table he was maneuvering down, would probably have jumped down to kick his ass, or fuck it. It was always hard to tell what an angry Felix would settle on. Thomas considered pausing long enough to confirm the table was hardwood, but that would give Pryce the time to end up in another house.

And really, would Felix work this hard for anything less than hardwood? Did the house even have polish?

Thomas glanced in the two bedrooms as he passed them for Pryce, then nearly slammed into the end of the hall, and looked outside, peering outside, looking for the toddler. There was no way, he was there, the window was closed, there was no opening in the wall, but when it came to Pryce, he was no longer taking anything for granted.

“Hey, dumb-ass,” Felix called, and as the otter nodded the way Thomas had come, the rat saw the toddler drop down the stairs.

“No!” Thomas appeared, ready to catch the tiny rat, but Pryce was already at the bottom of the stairs, ambling away. He appeared down the stairs, but already the toddler had vanished from sight. How? How did he —

“And what’s this pretty boy doing here?” Olavo cooed in the distance. “Why yes, you are a pretty boy.” Infant giggling followed the words.

Thomas followed the sounds to the kitchen, a full twenty-feet away from the stairs. Pryce didn’t teleport, Thomas decided. His power was to be in the place you least expected him to be in. Or maybe that was just what infants did, and not relegated to this one. His mother did have stories of the places she’d found Thomas when he was that age after all.

The capybara sat at the table, bouncing the infant rat on a knee and a half-eaten sandwich in the other hand. His phone projected text from where it rested on the table. It would be some economy text book, if he knew Olavo.

“Thank you for catching him,” Thomas said, dropping into the opposite chair.

“What are you doing running after guy?”

“My cardio,” Thomas replied, not believing how out of breath he was.

“Shouldn’t that be his father’s job?”

“Me and Madoc fucked for it, and since he got to pick what infant to look after, he picked the other one.”

“Limbani?” Olavo asked after thinking about it?

Thomas nodded. “I think he’s still freaked out about having a son. Which you can’t understand how weird that is, considering how much he doted over Pryce at Thanksgiving.”

The capybara nodded, looking at the text again.

“How are you handling the messed-up memory thing?” Thomas asked.

The capybara was the only one Thomas hadn’t checked in on since Samuel had left them. Yating was with his mother, still down from learning he had a twin brother. Felix being Felix, he was ignoring the whole thing in favor of his belief that nothing had been done to him. Hopefully there was some wax in the house and polishing that table would keep the otter busy until the had a cure. Anything that could be turned into an explosive was being kept away from Gilbert, but that had more to do from him nearly burning down the

kitchen than a reaction to his altered memories.

“Unless this mess,” Olavo said, not looking away from his reading, “as you call it, is hiding that this Henry had me betray my family, I’ll deal with it once I know what I’m missing. I called a cousin, so I can at least confirm I’m still a Medeiros.”

“Your father?”

The capybara shook his head. “That would force him to intervene, and I owe it to the Lewiston Elder to resolve this.” He motioned to the text. “And while that is happening, I still have courses to keep up with.”

“Isn’t it odd that your power hasn’t fixed our memories? I mean you have fucked each of us a few times, and at least once for me with the intent to heal me.”

“That isn’t how my power works. I fix physical damage. This is...something else.”

Thomas nodded. “Can I ask why economy and not medicine, seeing how you’re a healer?”

Olavo’s sighed had a trace of exasperation in it.

“You don’t have—”

“It’s fine. I just have to remind myself that the way you remember things, we haven’t had this discussion the first time you learned what I did.” He waved the text away. “My power isn’t that great. No, it just looks impressive to you because you don’t have any reference point. If you remembered what *phrases* did, or even a simply healing sigil, you wouldn’t even think of my cock when you’re hurt. I mean the only way my healing is better than the simplest sigil is that when I do it, it doesn’t matter if the wound is dirty or there’s still foreign matter in it. It’s more or part with an advanced sigil.”

He passes Pryce to Thomas, who feigned reluctance in taking him.

“I don’t have to think about what’s damaged with you. It just happens.” He stood and stretched. “That’s mainly why I’m not bothering with medicine. Knowing all that wouldn’t make me a better healer. And I’m not sure where I could get a residency where they’re let me fuck a patient better.”

“Would it work on a woman?” Thomas asked, making faces at the infant.

“I don’t see what it wouldn’t,” Olavo replied. “Other than me having to fuck her for it to work. He took a bottle of water from the fridge and leaned against the counter. “If I had to, there’s a *phrase* that allows me to get hard for a woman. But the only time I intend of letting it be used on me is when it’s time for me to have a son. And before you ask me again,” he frowned. “Sorry, that’s an again for me. Now that I think about it, it’s odd how you asked me about phrases when I explained my power to you that time.” He shook himself. “But like I said then, there are encyclopedia’s worth of *phrases* that have been recorded, just around healing. Using those, we could probably heal our memories, provided we knew how it was done at the very least. We call them *phrases*, but they’re more like programs, so you can’t really imply meaning. You need to tell the *phrase* what to look for and how to heal it. And it’s a language in the way code is a language, not how English is.”

“Sigil means symbols,” Thomas said.

“Yes. It’ll make sense once you remember everything.”

Thomas looked at the capybara, but kept the comment to himself. This time.

“But the ease healing through phrases and the sigils renders my kind of healer nothing more than a novelty, and within the Society more because of who I am, than what it does.”

“Okay, and who are you?” Thomas asked.

Olavo stared and muttered something in Spanish. “You don’t remember that either?”

“You never told me anything about the Society,” Thomas replied pointedly.

The capybara opened his mouth, then closed it. “I am the son of the Medeiros elder.”

“So your father is in charge of the entire family, like Raphael.”

Olavo nodded.

“Okay, I guess that explains the economy major then. You’re going to be taking over for your father.”

The capybara chuckled. “Ecom is only where it starts. Once I’m done, I’ll be doing one for politics, then urban planning.”

“You’re doing three majors?” Thomas asked in disbelief. “Where do you find the time?”

“Pay attention, Thomas. I am doing economy now. Then it will be politics, and after that, urban planning. Even if it’s something that Henry can do, trying to shove all that in my head at the same time would drive me insane, not to say the number of classes I’d still have to take to make sure none of the credits expired.”

“But you’re going to be paying graduate rates after your fist major so... right. You guys are all rich.” He thought about the major Olavo was taking. “That seems like an odd combination of majors to take. What’s your plan for them?”

“That is not... exactly how...” he sighed. “Well, it isn’t like this will be a surprise to you, once you

remember everything. My father is going to be taking over the country and—”

“He what?” Thomas exclaimed and Pryce giggled in innocence.

“Not this country, you idiot,” Felix said, heading for the cabinet under the sink. “His.”

Thomas glared at the otters back while he was bent over searching. He almost flipped him the bird when he straightened holding a dish rag and a bottle of cleaner, but decided it wasn’t something he should do in front of Pryce.

“Remember to bring it back,” Olavo told the otter as he left. “There’s not telling what Gilbert can do with that.”

“He’s the idiot, not me,” Felix snapped back before disappearing out the door.

“So,” Thomas told Olavo, “your father wants to take over Argentina? Won’t that make him a dictator?”

The capybara winced. “It’s more complicated. Argentina has a long history of corruption, and until recently, my father has been unable to act against that in other than small, ineffectual ways. There was an organization watching everything did, the whole of the Society, and if it didn’t like even the smallest detail, it would strike us down hard. It’s no longer there, so now he can act more overtly.”

Thomas gave his finger for Pryce to chew on while he let the information sink in. “Isn’t that extreme?”

“Sometimes, that is what is needed. And in the end, I can’t control what my father will do. I am only his son, not a trusted adviser. What I can do is ensure that when I inherit what he... made, I will be able to make something grand of it.”

“I guess,” Thomas said, then looked for the right words. He could tell Olavo thought it would be a good thing, but weren’t the history books filled with really bad times starting with that belief? His need for a reply was taken away when Gilbert called.

“Thomas, you need to come here.”

Olavo shrugged when Thomas looked at him, then took Pryce from him before the rat headed for the living room.

“What’s the—” he started to as the armadillo, with the red panda seated next to him.

“There you are,” the pangolin on the television screen said. “Why weren’t you here, with them?”

“I—” Thomas motioned to the kitchen. “What are you doing on the television?” he asked, as where she was speaking from registered. Out the corner of his eye he saw Felix polishing the end table in a corner and actively ignoring the television.

“Talking with you,” she said, then took a drag from her E-Cig.

“You do know about phones, right?” Thomas said, annoyed.

“And I know how easy it is to spy on those.” She motioned around her head. “Who’d ever think I’d use this to call you?”

“Especially since there isn’t a microphone on it,” Gilbert pointed out.

“You know,” she said, eyeing him. “I’d think a bunch of guys who can make stuff happen with their dicks would know better than to be dicks about how I use magic.” She shifted her attention to Thomas. “And as for you, specifically? I’m sort of calling in that favor.”

“I’m kind of the middle of stuff,” Thomas said, looking at the others.

“Oh, I know,” she said with a chuckle, “but *that* can wait.”

“What’s going on?” Madoc asked as Thomas was about to point out he’d decide what could and couldn’t wait, not her. The muscular rat froze, staring at the television. “How?”

“Magic,” Thomas said before Shila’s annoyed expression could be turned into words. “Look. I said I’d move you, but I never thought it would be this soon. You sort of implied I’d have time to train. Right now there aren’t a lot of places I can take you, and I would—”

“It’s not for me,” she cut him off, then sighed. “Grant needs a rescue.”

“What? Where is he?” Thomas asked.

“Not a fucking clue.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Olavo said from the living room entrance, “but if you don’t know where he is, how can you know that he needs help?”

She hesitated. “Okay, so, I don’t know, know. My conclusion is based on inferences. There’s been chatter on the net for a while about Chamber agents on the hunt.”

“Chamber?” Gilbert asked, looking at the others as if he needed confirmation he’d heard her right.

“Internal name,” Shila replied. “Don’t worry that genius head of yours over it. Anyway. Magnet and Light were the only one to walk away from—”

"Hold on," Thomas cut her off. "Magnet? Light? What are they, members of bad names super-villains anonymous?"

"It's what I call them," she replied dryly, "on account of them being assholes who can't leave the rest of us to live our lives in peace." She fixed her gaze on him. "Can I continue?" she looked the room over and the opening mouth closed. "Thank you. Shovel didn't survive that fall, but the Chamber still has his staff." She sighed as Thomas raised a hand. "Go ahead."

"How is a shovel a staff? Because if you're talking about who I think you are, then when he was using looked like some generic hardware shovel."

"How close to him did you get?" she asked. "Don't answer that, there's a video showing you never got that close. So what you saw was something that looked, at a distance like a regular shovel. At a distance, Grant's staff just looks like a staff. And even if it had looked like a store bought shovel." She raised her hand so Thomas could see it. "Where's my staff?"

"I don't know," Thomas replied. "Off camera somewhere?"

"Maybe, and yet, I'm still using it. It gives us power, not limit what we can do, jsut like sex gives you—"

"Actually," Olavo interrupted her. "Our god gives us our—"

"Kid," she cut him off, annoyed. "We so don't have time to argue over who's belief system is the right one right now, especially since you're going to hate the answer." She took a drag. "Now, can I go on with how I've work out Grant needs help, or are you all more interested in wasting time Grant might not have?"

Thomas glances at the others, who were looking at him. In the silence she went on.

"Shovel's out of play until they find a wielder. No, I'm not taking more questions."

Thomas lowered his hand.

"But Heat Wave's in motion, and what I see tells me they're going to be meeting up with Magnet, Light and Lullaby, who's with them now. The only time they gather like that is when they think they're getting close to their target, and with Magnet involved, after his recent defeat, there's only one person that asshole is after."

"But you don't know where he is." Thomas sighed. "Shila, unless I'm doing line of sight, where I'm going has to be a place I'm really familiar with. The only ones I can be sure of are in Bozeman and in San Francisco Bay. Unless he's at one—"

"No, he's north. Light and Magnet showed up on camera in Great Falls when Lullaby joined them. I have their car driving north on the I15 out of there. Heat Wave triggered my lookouts when their flight registered as landing in Calgary International Airport. So while I don't know exactly where Grant is, if Magnet's heading for Calgary, you can be sure Grant's somewhere around there."

"So, we'd have to go to Canada?" Thomas asked, and she nodded. "But the only thing leading us to Grant is how his enemy's moving." He rubbed his face. "For anyone other than Grant, I'd tell you where to shove your request, but how the fuck do you expect me to get to Canada?"

"That's—" she started

"I can get you there," Gilbert said.

"You what?" Thomas asked. "Why?"

"To get out of his place," the armadillo replied, throwing his hands up. "If I have to sit here and do nothing for another day, I am going to go insane."

"And how are you going to get me there?" Thomas asked.

Gilbert stared at him. "Okay, that's just insulting. Yes, it's seen better days, but it got us here from San Francisco, not to say from Lewiston to Denver and then to San Francisco."

"That's not what I mean. Unless things changed very recently, there's a border between the US and Canada," Thomas said. "I don't own a passport."

"That's not the problem you think it is," Olavo said. "We have magic."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Felix said, looking up from the end table. "You're going to risk your life for the kangaroo that fried your van when he's on the run from his own people? What is wrong with you?"

"I'm going to get out of his house," the armadillo replied angrily. "And how dare you imply that I shouldn't help a man who save my frat brother, Felix Chouteau. Oh, him and me are going to have words about what he did to my van, but that guy protected Thomas from us when he had no reason to do that. I don't even want to think about where we'd be at right now if we'd gotten Thomas and brought him back to this Henry guy. You can be a selfish bastard, I'm not going to be one."

"This is not Society business," the otter said loudly as he looked at the others. "We don't get involve in

other faction problems.”

“I am not getting involved,” Yating said slowly and raised a hand to forestall Gilbert. “I can’t leave my mother alone, or tell her to go home without knowing what happened to my brother... to Yahui.” He said the name as if it was foreign to him.

“I can’t go either,” Madoc said. “I want to, but I’m sorry Thomas, I have to stay here. There’s this kid who thinks I’m his father. I don’t feel any kind of kinship to him, but everyone tells me he’s my son. It’s killing me that I have a son and I can’t feel it.” He hit his heart with a fist. “I have to be here so that the moment Raphael has a way to unlock my memories, I can give my son his father back.”

“I get that,” Thomas said. “I really do. If I had a son, I’m sure I’d—” Thomas looked at Madoc’s empty arms, then Olavo’s also empty arms. “Where’s Pryce?”

“In the kitchen,” Olavo replied. “Limbani came in so I asked him to watch over him.”

“You left an infant with our monkey?” Thomas exclaimed, then ran to the kitchen before anyone had time to respond. He skidded to a stop in the kitchen’s archway, ready to stop whatever the sex obsessed monkey might be—

Limbani sang softly in his native language while gently rocking Pryce in his arms.

The song and gentle way he help Pryce was a surprise on their own, but what arrested the rat was that the monkey was dressed. It was only a pair of jeans, and they were so tight they might as well have been painted on, but it was one more piece of clothing Limbani had had on since the moment they had he has set foot in the house.

The monkey stopped singing as he noticed the rat. “What?” he asked in a whisper.

Chapter 37

Coutts, AB, March 1

Thomas stood, holding onto the bare wall of the van for balance as the border receded behind them.

It had worked.

“How the fuck did it work?” he demanded, stepping over Limbani and Olavo, who were still fucking. The monkey wasn’t letting the fact the magic no longer needed to be powered stop him from having sex.

“Magic,” the armadillo replied as Thomas dropped into the passenger seat. He glanced in his direction and smiled.

“Yeah,” Thomas replied. “You guys said we were going to use magic, but how did that—” he motioned to the walls of the van and the dried cum that couldn’t be seen, “—made it so that no one heard Limbani screaming in ecstasy?”

They’d spent two hours jerking off in a rest area just south of the border, so Gilbert had cum to write on the walls with. Then, as soon as the border came within sight, the three of them were ordered to fuck until he told them to stop. Thomas had done his best to be quiet. Olavo seemed to make an attempt, while Limbani couldn’t drop the volume below eight when he had sex.

The armadillo pulled his gaze away from Thomas’s naked crotch and back on the road. “Right, you don’t remember—or haven’t actually done—the studying over the last six months I remember me and the guys helping you with.”

Thomas appreciated that Gilbert included it could be his memory of those events that could be wrong. Knowing all their memories had been altered hadn’t led to them agreeing on what had or hadn’t been. He did his best not to think about it, but anytime one of them acted like he should know something, like he was the only one with messed up memories, that nagging little voice at the back of his head started saying ‘what if they’re right?’

“Okay,” Gilbert said, and Thomas heard the trace of annoyance. “At its core, it’s just a misdirection *phrase*. One of those ‘there’s nothing interesting here’ sort of thing. To that I added a bunch of charging up phrases they put in houses that need to have sustained magic, because misdirection’s fickle as my uncle’s temper. They’ll also fail against active searches until you go all out and throw more power at them than you ever think you’ll need. Hence why wrote everywhere I could. Not that any of this would have helped if they’d had a quad sniffing for drugs nearby. Our magic’s iffy around them for some reason, and you can bet they would have reacted to the smell of sex.”

“It’s the—” Olavo grunted as he thrust. “—nose.”

Thomas looked at Gilbert, who shrugged. “The scent theorem’s weak. Sure, as a group we don’t use a sense of smell as much as canine quads, but if it was valid, at least some from the dog related species would be able to smell through it. And before you bring that up, the idea that it’s because quads fall under the domain of the Green Man is no more valid since out *phrases* can affect women.”

Thomas’s question for clarification on the Green Man was interrupted by Limbani screaming louder than even his usual and arching his back.

“Is he really hyper-sexual, even by Society standard, just because he’s Limbani, or is it because he’s always using his power to see into his future that leaves him sex starved?”

Gilbert snorted. “It’s because he’s an Adesida.” He sighed as Thomas looked at him in confusion. “Right, memories. Limbani’s acting like just everyone in his family. The Adesida are a bunch of sex hungry guys with absolutely no restraints.”

“Lies!” Limbani screamed, his voice going falsetto as Olavo slammed in. “My grandpa has a dungeon.”

“See what I mean?” Gilbert said.

* * * * *

Coutts, AB, March 1

“Fuck, it’s cold,” Thomas said, closing the van’s door behind him. “And I thought Minneapolis and Bozeman were cold.” He sighed as the heat enveloped him.

They were somewhere south of Calgary, and what had been a quick run to the restaurant and back had left him doubting the existence of that thing they called warmth. The van reminded him it did exist, not that it should, with the walls stripped to the outside metal and the seats gone after the lightning caused explosion had basically turned them into slag. The mattress covering the floor couldn’t contribute anything in the way of insulation.

But of course, what happened on them was responsible for the heat, since that was, again, magic.

“We’re at a higher longitude,” Olavo said, undoing his thick overcoat.

“And altitude,” Gilbert said from the driver’s seat, “and they’re having a cold snap.”

The opened and even the magical heat couldn’t keep the cold out as Limbani threw himself into Thomas’s arms. “Hold me, I’m dying of the cold.” The monkey started undoing the rat’s pants, causing him to chuckle, until frigid hands wrapped around his cock and balls and Thomas’s surprised scream joined Olavo’s curses as he hurried to close the door.

“Oh,” the monkey sighed in pleasure. “You’re so hot.”

“Great,” a woman said dryly, coming from the sound system. “I really hoped you’d get that out of your system before getting back in.”

“Restaurants don’t have any privacy,” Gilbert replied.

Thomas fought to get the monkey’s hand out of his pants, which left him hard and leaking, and since he hadn’t gotten any new underwear still, exposed in and in a hurry to pull his pants up. Hopefully she couldn’t see in the back using her brand of magic.

“Didn’t know you guys cared about privacy,” Shila said.

“We’re as vulnerable as anyone else when it comes to being arrested for indecent exposure.” Olavo sat in the passenger seat. “I hope that you’re calling to tell us you’ve located Grant.”

“Narrowed where he should be,” she replied. “Heat Wave landed in Calgary half an hour ago. He rented a car, with a drop off in Red Deer, instead of returning it at the airport.”

“Why aren’t they returning it there?” Limbani asked, taking his overcoat off. “How are they getting back?” he then started taking off his shirt.

“Maybe they aren’t,” Shila said. “Magnet, Light, and Lullaby are in an SUV large enough to fit them and a handful of others if they have to. I can’t read their minds, just what’s floating on the net. And that’s telling me they’re going to Red Deer.”

“It’s two hours from here,” Gilbert said, checking his phone before slotting it into the ignition and starting the van.

“So we’re still behind them,” Thomas grumbled. “What’s the arrangement for me, once the two of us appear in San Francisco? I can’t count on Grant being able to keep me alive, since we have no idea what state he’s going to be in when we find him.”

“The room’s mine until you need it. As for arrangement, what’s your preference?”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “Guy, cock, able to get hard and fuck me.”

“That’s it?” Gilbert asked, looking over his shoulder in surprise before looking ahead again and getting onto the highway.

“I’m going to be dying,” Thomas said. “That’s not the time to be picky.”

“Give the guys nice muscle,” Limbani said, pushing himself up between the seats and blocking Thomas’s view with his bare ass. “Our Thomas loves himself good muscles on those bones, along with a good thick boner.”

She sighed. “Now I’m regretting agreeing to handle that part of the rescue. I’ll make sure there’s two guys in the adjoining room, and the moment you and Grant show up, they’ll be there to keep you alive.”

“Wait, there was a room connected to our suite?” Thomas asked, trying to remember where they might have been a door he hadn’t opened.

“Not officially,” Olavo stated. “But it’s a Society hotel, so being able to move between rooms without using the hall is considered an advantage. Shila, do you have any image of the people hunting Grant? Knowing what they look like will make our job easier.”

“Images are being added to your external drives,” she said after a few seconds. “Now, about Grant. He’s going to be mobile on top of being warded. Beyond that, your monkey’s going to have better odds of finding him than I will.”

“Which means I’m going to need energy,” Limbani said, wriggling his ass in Thomas’s face.

Thomas looked to Olavo, but the capybara shook his head.

“No, I kept him satisfied after the border. Now it’s your turn to satiate the insatiable.”

* * * * *

Red Deer, AB, March 1

Thomas slammed the door to his hotel room in the monkey’s face.

His room, by himself.

The trip from Kansas City had taught him two things. One, if he couldn’t teleport there, he was flying. He didn’t care if he did so coach, or in a container, but he was not driving anywhere further than a couple of hours ever again.

Two, he was never, ever, going to South Africa.

With Gilbert bringing up his family’s reputation, Limbani had waxed nostalgic about them, the things they got up to, and how his brothers were going to love Thomas. They weren’t actually his brothers; the monkey had explained, but nephews, cousins and uncles, who had been raised together. Adesida tradition was for each man to only have once child at a time, but all the boys were raised as one group by all the men. The two with Limbani in the pictures the monkey always on his desk in his room at the frat, were a nephew and uncle he was especially close to.

Thomas had finally started to relax, seated on the edge of the bed, when the door connecting both rooms opened. The horror vanished when he saw it was Olavo in the doorway, instead of Limbani. The monkey was on the bed, legs over the armadillo’s shoulders and screaming in delight.

“I want to be alone,” Thomas said firmly.

The capybara raised his hand. “I’m just letting you know that as soon as they’re done, we’re ordering food and figuring out a plan.”

“As soon as *they’re* done?” Thomas asked, the amusement eclipsing his annoyance. “You’re actually waiting until the heat death of the universe before eating?”

Olavo looked over his shoulder. “Right. Once Gil’s done. Limbani can go without for a while.”

“I pick the food,” Thomas stated. He was not having another two hundred dollar meal.

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Red Deer, AB, March 1

Thomas sighed in delight as he ate the slice of pizza.

He’d been worried at how easily Olavo and Gilbert had agreed with his choice of meal. Yes, everyone loved pizza, but when it came to the kind of money they had, those could be something like one strand of cheese form that one exclusive quad goat in the Himalayas everyone with money talked about, on a cracker made from extra special wheat that had gone through some bird’s digestive system.

Instead, Olavo had returned with two pizzas in proper pizza boxes, even if the name was not one Thomas had ever heard of before, and while the quality of the ingredients was higher than what he and Paul would order from the local pizza joint. It was actually a pizza.

He looked at the map projected above the table and some of his enjoyment soured. “That’s a lot of park space.” He pointed to the green zones. “Even if he stays close to the interstate access point, he can easily lose himself in all that space. He’s used to roughing it.” He frowned. “I think.”

“Limbani’s moan was sexual as he sucked on the cheese-filled crust, but they’s stopped reacting to his antics after the fourth slice.

“I think this is beyond roughing it,” Olavo said, looking up from his phone. “They’re calling for a low of minus thirty-five degree Celsius. I don’t know if magic can let him survive that.”

“What’s that in real temperature?” Gilbert asked between bites.

“It’s suck my cock cold, Rowling,” the capybara replied, grinning. “The city has a thriving housing market. It’d been easy enough for him to squat in one of them. Even without power, the insulation would make whatever magic he’s using more effective.”

“That’s if he bothers with a house at all,” Gilbert said, putting the beer can down.

“You have an alternative?” Olavo asked.

“Depends, you going to suck the heat out of my cock for it?” the armadillo grinned as he turned to show the capybara his hard cock.

“Can you two sixty-nine later?” Thomas asked, trying to mask his annoyance at their behavior. “After

we have a plan to find my friend?"

"How about we all one-thirty-eight it?" Limbani asked.

Thomas stared at him.

"Come on, it's not that hard." The monkey snorted. "Unlike me. If two guys sucking each other off is a sixty-nine, then the four of us in a daisy chain is one-thirty-eight."

Olavo rolled his eyes. "Someone needs to shove their cock in his mouth so he can't spout stuff like that."

"After we have a plan of action," Thomas re-stated. "So out with it, Gilbert."

"It's already out," Limbani said. "You can touch it to confirm it."

"You better have warmed your hands," the armadillo told the monkey, "before even thinking of touching it. You're not getting me to scream like you did Thomas in the car."

"But you're so hot too," the monkey said, making eyes at Gilbert and scooting his chair closer.

"I swear to God," Thomas said. "If you don't stop side-tracking us, Limbani, I'm throwing you outside for the night."

The monkey grinned and opened his mouth.

"I wouldn't," Olavo warned. "I think Thomas has reached his limit."

"Sorry," Limbani said, shrinking in on himself slightly. "I was just trying to keep the mood light."

It took a handful of slow breath for Thomas to calm enough his voice was steady. "Gilbert?"

"Speaking as someone who spent a lot of energy on his van, What Thomas told us of his makes me think he did a lot to it. That he either cares about a lot, or about being in one. With all the traveling he does, I'm thinking the latter is a strong possibility. Also, do we really think he walked all the way here? We know the truck he had when he picked up Thomas is still impounded, so I'm thinking he found another one and—"

"There's another reason that it makes sense," Thomas said, remembering some things Grant had explained. "The way he makes himself harder to find is by using the concept of his truckbeing in motion. Something about him having already moved on from where people are searching for him. He'd definitely go for that again."

"We can ask around the shops," Gilbert said. "I doubt kangaroos are all that common around here."

"Craft stores too," Thomas said. "He prefers working with wood, but arts and crafts are also part of how his magic works." He paused, the lack of reaction from them taking him by surprise. "You're not finding it strange that he does magic with crafts?"

"Our magic's powered by putting our cock in other guys," Limbani said, "and getting cocks put into us," he added with a hopeful smile.

"I'm not going to say I get how that works," Gilbert said, "but I'm not going to be surprised that it does."

"I guess this is all still so new to me." He drained the can of coke. "Okay, then as soon as it's light tomorrow, we split up and go looking into the housing situation for squatters, and the auto shops and craft stores in case anyone remembers a kangaroo. Agreed?"

Gilbert and Olavo nodded.

"Yes!" Limbani exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "We have a plan!" he pulled Thomas out of his chair. "Now you're going to charge me so I can do minute by minute checks without keeling over, the way you're going to do after teleporting the kangaroo away from him."

Thomas glared at the smirking capybara as he was pushed on the bed. "You are so taking him tomorrow."

Chapter 38

Red Deer, AB, March 2nd

“Well?” Thomas asked Gilbert as he exited the far too respectable-looking garage for someone like Grant being able to afford. He was already working out where the next store was, a fabric store on the way to another garage.

“He was here,” the armadillo said, and Thomas looked at him so fast he was worried he’d gotten whiplash. “Yesterday. He picked up a rotor assembly for a twenty-forty-seven Intrepid.”

Thomas looked over the shop again, the golden lettering of the names, the price of the parts being advertised. “Gilbert, it’s got to be some other kangaroo. Grant doesn’t have the kind of money they’re asking for.”

The armadillo smiled as he started walking. “Oh, it didn’t cost him all that much. The rotor for the forty-seven came with an anti-thief system on it out of the manufacturer. This guy couldn’t use it on anything, so he was more than happy for your friend to take it off his hands.”

“Stolen parts?” Thomas asked after thinking it over.

Gilbert nodded. “Never let how a place look fool you into thinking that means they’re honest or not.” He motioned ahead of them. “That’s the direction the guy said he watched the kangaroo head in.”

“So that’s why you wanted to check-out this place? You know they sold stolen parts?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Then why?”

The armadillo glanced at him before answering. “Unlike you, I don’t know him. I haven’t built preconception as to the kind of guy is he.” Thomas snorted. “Okay, as to the kind of places he’d shop at. You told us he’s in the move and doesn’t have a lot of money. But as far as I’m concerned, that’s just what he wanted you to see. He does magic, and he did a lot of work on his truck. Those are the two things I know. Neither of them tells me he’d stay away from a place just because of the prices.”

“I’m not going to argue they aren’t preconceptions, since...” Thomas motioned to the garage behind them. “But does us walking in this direction lead us to him? I take it you know what an Intrepid look like?”

“The Intrepid is a car, and I get the feeling he’ll go for another truck. I’m more hoping we’re going to see a kangaroo standing next to a truck waiting for us to find him.”

“Sure, Grant, standing in one place when he’s got people already hunting him.”

“You have a better idea?” Gilbert asked, smirking.

Thomas didn’t, so he walked in silence.

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Red Deer, AB, March 2nd

“I need to warm up,” Gilbert muttered, then headed for a charging station so old it might have been converted from a gas station. There was concrete level with the pavement where fueling islands could have stood. At the back, most of the parking was occupied by cargo trucks. He looked for a pickup that might be Grant’s, one with added work that would come across as it being badly held together, but nothing there looked older than a few years.

Inside was a convenience store on one side, with a restaurant on the other, and the armadillo headed there.

The restaurant had the same sense of antiquity as the outside, with booths out of the aughts with their faded fabric and tables made of solid, dented and scarred wood. They grabbed coffees from the dispenser and sat in at a table.

Gilbert updated the others, who then agreed to join them so they could over a new plan of attack. Tomas relaxed now that he knew he didn’t have to step outside again.

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Red Deer, AB, March 2nd

When the door opened with the electronic replication of classic bells, Thomas looked up again, to see if this time it was their friends finally. It had already been half an hour, and he was getting hung—

“Fuck.” Thomas hunched down as the vole Shila called Magnet stood in the entryway, with the raccoon who had been identified as Lullaby. Worse than that, the vole was looking directly at him.

Thomas quickly went over his options as the man motioned toward the drink station.

Run, was lit in bright red, flashing and underlined with exclamation marks. With his power, it was simple. All he had to do was reach over, grab Gilbert’s hand, and look out the window. He’d be tired, maybe? Why hadn’t he practiced taking someone with him for a line-of-sight teleport. If he was near death because of it, then—

Fuck, his indecision had let the vole head toward them. Gilbert was still reading on his phone, unaware. Okay, fuck line of sight. He could take Gilbert to Montana, he’d make sure Thomas didn’t die, then call the other to—

“Mister Hertz,” the man said. “If I may ask that you not vanish on me this time. We are only here to talk. May we sit with you and Mister Rowling?” His voice was deep and now that Thomas wasn’t listening to it through gale force winds, he could make out a slight English accent.

Not looking up from his phone, Gilbert frowned. The fact he didn’t jump in surprise made Thomas think the armadillo was more aware of what was happening around them than he’d given him credit for.

“I promise,” the vole said when neither responded. “My and my associate are only here to discuss the unfortunate situation you have found yourself in, and are pulling your friends in along with you.” He was dressed in an expensive black overcoat that made his gray fur seem pale. It supported Grant’s comment about everyone with magic being rich.

Thomas wished Gilbert said something because he had no idea what to do with this approach. He’d expected them to pull out their staves the moment they saw him and—where were the staves?

He leaned to the side so he could see the raccoon approach with two steaming mugs. Thomas didn’t know what her staff looked like, but even if it was under her overcoat, it would make a bump, right?

“As you can see,” the vole said when Thomas looked at him again, “we are unarmed. All I am interested in is a friendly discussion.”

“Ah guess,” Gilbert drawled, finally joining the conversation, “tha if y’all want to talk. We better have a drink ta go with it.” He caught the attention of a server. “Honey! Bring the bottle oh the best whiskey ya got!”

Thomas tried not to stare. Where was Gilbert pulling that accent from? He and Laurence barely gained one when they were drunk out of their minds or pissed.

“That’s quite alright,” the vole said, smiling. “My companion is bringing tea.”

Gilbert made a face. “Friends don’t drink water with friends,” he said with a hint of disbelief.

“Are they giving you trouble?” the raccoon asked as she handed him one of the mugs. Her accent made Thomas think she was from the east coast.

“Excuse me,” The server said as she squeezed next to the raccoon to place a bottle on the table along with four shot glasses. Gilbert only had the time to hand her a bill, along with a ‘much obliged’, before she hurried away.

“No,” the vole said, sounding annoyed, then looked displeased at the mug as he took it. “It simply seems that Mister Rowling is hoping to get us drunk.”

“If all ya can stomach is one,” the armadillo sneer as he looked at a shot glass, “then ya can have just one.” He filled the shot glass with the dark amber liquid before sliding it to the vole. The next on when to the woman and the third to Thomas. Gilbert drained the water out of his glass before filling it to the threequarter mark with the whiskey.

He took a sip. “What d’ya wanna talk about?”

The raccoon sipped her glass without reaction, while the vole eyed it distastefully before sipping and placing it down again. Not wanting to be the odd man out, Thomas sipped his and the wheeze that escaped his lips as his throat burned was the best he could manage in his attempt not to choke on it.

How the fuck was Gilbert drinking this like he was nothing more than beer?

“Mister Hertz. You have inadvertently found yourself in the middle of a situation you do not belong in. I do not know what Mister Summer has told you, but I can promise you that none of it will be accurate.”

“You attacked him for no reason,” Thomas said before stopping himself. The alcohol couldn’t be affecting him already, right?

“Did he tell you that?” the man asked, while the raccoon smirked. As refined as Magnet seemed, there

was something sleazy about Lullaby, even in the expensive clothing. “Have you considered that Mister Summer had given us reason to want to bring him to justice?”

“So da kangaroo’s a criminal?” Gilbert asked, sounding too interested, too pleased for Thomas’s comfort. Grant wasn’t a criminal. He had a second independent source telling him the Chamber was bad news, so—

They didn’t know he’s spoken with Shila. They might not even know she existed. They thought all he had to go by was what Grant had told him and who Thomas had seen. They would think they could twist any of that to their advantage, and if he let them, could he turn the situation to get himself and Gilbert out of this? They were unarmed, after all.

Or were they? His friends could do more than use their powers. Grant could make talismans. Could the Chamber? He couldn’t remember Grant saying anything about that, but they used staves like he did.

“I hate this,” he grumbled. Anyway he looked at it, his troubles only increased. He sipped his glass and choked on whiskey.

“Yes,” Magnet said, amused, “Mister Summer has put you in a rather bad position. But I want to reassure you. You hold no interest to us; you are merely a bystander. If you tell us where Grant is, we will take him, and leave you and your friends be.”

Was that a threat? Thomas looked into the glass for answers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gilbert watching him. He couldn’t read the expression. He couldn’t believe them, could he? He’d heard what Shila had to say about them. And while these two were here, the other two had to be out there, looking for Grant or his friends.

Wait, how had Magnet and Lullaby known to come here, into this restaurant? There had been no surprise when the vole had locked eyes with Thomas. Not even some at finding Gilbert with him. He’d even know Gilbert’s name.

Then there was the teleportation.

Everyone who’d found out about it told him the same thing. He was doing the impossible, and these two, who had seen him teleport away from them with Grant, claimed they weren’t interested?

He sighed and hoped Gilbert wouldn’t contradict him. “I don’t know where he is. We split up not long after I took him from you.”

“Mister Hertz,” the vole said, tone turning severe, “I find it difficult to believe you, considering you are currently in Red Deer.”

“I’m on the run,” he replied, trying to sound exasperated. “First from this guy.” He hiked a thumb toward Gilbert. “Then with him from the guy who sent them after me. We figured no one sane would chase us into these frozen wastelands.” Oh fuck. He was going to have to go outside again.

“Kid,” the raccoon said, her accent thicker. “Don’t play this game, okay? The roo’s not worth it. He’d drop you the moment things got hard. He did drop you. Just tell us where he is and we’re gone. You never have to hear from us again.”

“I don’t know where he is,” Thomas replied, the mounting frustration real.

“I am asking you,” the vole said, “politely, to reconsider your answer, Mister Hertz. While I am not in a position to do you any lasting damage, it is well within my power to inflict pain the likes you cannot imagine. To you, and Mister Rowling,” he added.

“Why can’t you kill him?” Gilbert asked, frowning and his accent gone.

“Part of an agreement with a third party,” the vole answered with a dismissive wave of the hand.

“Like we’re going to do that guy’s bidding.” The raccoon snorted, only to be glared at by the vole. “What? Don’t tell me you give a damn what his plans are for the kid. He’s the only teleporter in existence.”

“I think you tipped your hand,” Gilbert said. “Thomas, get ready to run.” He took a quick drink, then raised his other hand, palm up, to his lips.

With a curse, Thomas grabs his overcoat as the vole opened his mouth.

The flame appeared over the armadillo’s palm as he blew his mouthful of whiskey at it. It exploded into a fireball, forcing the vole and raccoon away. Gilbert was at his side, also putting on his overcoat, as they rushed for the door.

Chapter 39

Red Deer, AB, March 2nd

“What’s the plan?” Thomas demanded as they exited and a frigid wind tried to blast them back inside. How the fuck had he forgotten it was this cold?

“Improvise!” Gilbert replied as he turned right. “Oh Shit.” The armadillo backpedaled.

At the end of the building stood a coyote with one staff in a hand, the one Magnet had when they’d attack Grant, and another one in the other. This one was black cast iron, ending in a bent point that started glowing red. Thomas joined Gilbert in turning, only to stay in place as a vixen, with the transparent shaft of her staff resting on her shoulder, smiled at her from the other end of the building.

“We need another plan,” Thomas said, wondering where they could go. There were the cargo trucks. Maybe Gilbert knew how to drive one of those, and magic could bypass the locks. The rest of his half-baked plans were wrenched out of him when Gilbert grabbed his arm and pulled him across the parking lot, angling for the road.

“You are wasting your time!” the vole yelled, his tone calm. “You cannot run from us.”

“Gilbert?” Thomas asked, hoping for the armadillo to share his plan. The pause before the response had to have been brief, but it felt like an eternity.

“You’re going to have to get us out of here,” Gilbert said, sounding less than his usual self-assured.

“What about the others?” Thomas replied, “they’re heading here. They’re going to walk right into their arms.”

The armadillo looked around as they ran, cursing. Thomas saw him look at the charging station.

“Fuck,” Gilbert said under his breath as he looked away and back to the road. “Why do we have to be stuck with electrical? I can do stuff with gas. Couldn’t they have waited until tomorrow to start the switchover?”

A line of searing heat crossed their path, forcing them to stop, just as the wind reclaimed the displaced air. Gilbert picked up a broken Rebar off the ground and held the jagged end pitifully at the four Chamber agents in front of the restaurant.

The vole paused in taking his staff from Heat Wave, then smiled as he flicked it to the side and the bar flew out of the armadillo’s hand. “Do you understand how serious the predicament you are in is, Mister Hertz?” The vole place the end of the staff down and rested his hand on the top, as if it was a cane. “This is not a battle you will win.”

“Thomas,” Gilbert said, interposing himself between the rat and the Chamber, “when I—” the shifting wind went from frigid to summer hot as its direction reversed. Before Gilbert started speaking again, rain started falling. Warm enough, it steamed as it hit the cold pavement.

“Grant!” the vole yelled, sounding pleased. “I am so glad you finally joined us.”

“Get the fuck away from the kids, Kingsley.” The kangaroo stepped around the building where Heatwave had been, staff raised over his head. On his left was Olavo, on the right—

Limbani let out a war cry as he ran at the vixen, inexplicably dodging the lances of light she sent at him with her staff. He jumped, kicked her in the face, then landed with a triumphant grin. The metal bar that Gilbert had held moments before hit the monkey squarely in the face, and he fell back.

“Someone get Lim!” Olavo yelled, Thomas already on his way to the fallen monkey.

“Get everyone together!” he yelled back. He had no idea if he could teleport more than one person, let alone five, but it looked like he was about to find out. He stopped as he reached Limbani, only for his feet to continue on the slick combination of hot rain on frozen ground and he landed on his ass. He grabbed the unconscious monkey and heaved him as he stood, giving Madoc a silent thank you for all the training the other rat had given him, along with the boosting injection that the sex—

He tried to step away from the form he just noticed next to him, but pain erupted in his side, and before he could comprehend what Light was doing there, his legs buckled out from under him. The monkey slid away as Thomas sprawled, barely able to breathe.

“It worked,” Light shouted, grinning despite her broken and bleeding muzzle.

Thomas fought to turn his head enough to see where Limbani was, then tried to reach for him. All he

needed was to grab him and he could take the two of them away. Only his arm barely moved. He felt like those days when he was so sick he could barely shift in his bed. At least he had an alternate way to get next to the monkey.

He remained where he was as shouts erupted around him. He tried to teleport to Limbani again, but nothing happened. As he focused on recreating the shiver down his back that always marked the trigger to a teleport, he realized the kind of tired he was. This was the nearly deadly exhaustion that hit when he did a long range teleport. Only, instead of falling into unconsciousness with the hope someone would fuck him and keep him living, he was wide awake, and, other than the exhaustion, didn't feel like he was dying.

Forcing his head to turn, hoping to see what she'd stabbed him with, Thomas saw Olavo in a scuffle with a thin wolf. He'd never seen him before, and he didn't have a staff. Was he some bystander who didn't realize who the bad guys were? The capybara had the fight under control, but Thomas wondered about the others and managed to slowly shift and see that Grant was facing off against Heat Wave, nearly visible distortion of heat being batted away from the kangaroo by wind and rain.

The question of how that was possible by an even more impossible one. Gilbert was facing off with Magnet, hand extended before him, but instead of a candle flame which was all the armadillo could generate, there was a ball of fire nearly two feet in diameter pushing against an unseen wall that had to come from the vole, by his worried expression.

Thomas had asked why Gilbert hadn't practiced turning the flame into a jet of fire, when he'd first seen the demonstration, and Gilbert had laughed, telling him that his was what he was able to do after years of training. The only more useless power than his, Gilbert had continued, was Felix's ability to invade other people's dreams.

Thomas had glared at the otter, remembering some dreams where Felix had been a principal actor.

Pain pulsed in his side and his memory and vision turned blurry, then his vision came back into focus. Right. He had something more important to do than wonder at other people's powers.

The wooden handle of a knife poked out of his side, through the overcoat. Only, on it were symbols that seem to glow red. He reached for it as someone yelled.

"No!"

The anguish in the voice yanked Thomas's attention away from the knife and to the wolf who had cried out. He and Olavo's fight was interrupted by watching Grant bring his staff down on his raised knee, breaking it in two.

A wave of energy passed through Thomas as he stared in dismay at the kangaroo holding the two pieces of what Thomas was certain had meant more than life itself to Grant. The expression of loss on his face supported that. So why?

Then the icy wind hit him, and he realized that not only had the rain stopped, but the sky was now cloudless, the sun bathing them in light without effect against the returning cold.

"That was mine!" the wolf yelled, then screamed in pain as Olavo got over the surprise faster and punched him hard enough to drop him.

"What did you do?" Magnet demanded, the act surprising him enough the fireball moved closer before he concentrated again.

"Keeping a promise," Grant said in a soft tone that made Thomas wonder if he'd meant for anyone to hear. He squared his shoulders and looked at the vole, still in a stalemate of sorts against the fireball. "There's nothing left for you, Kingsley. Just leave."

"If you think you can commit such a blasphemy and I will let you go, you are mistaken." Thomas couldn't tell if the strain in his voice was anger or having to push the fireball away. "Harrison, Take him down, but do not kill him. There is a punishment appropriate to his action waiting for him."

The coyote grinned, turning to the kangaroo, then cursed and raised his hands to keep the two pieces of Grant's staff from hitting him in the face. The kangaroo was right behind them and, as Heat Wave lowered his staff, Grant grabbed it with both hands.

Thomas stared as the expected scream of pain from Grant didn't come, nor did he fly off. Rejected by the staff like Yating had. [what follows is based on the fact I don't remember the exact wording Grant used when he told Thomas about the staff protecting themselves. I remember it as him only stating it affects someone from other factions. If I'm wrong I can change this] Grant said their power came through the staves, so hadn't he rejected what he was by breaking his? Shouldn't Heat Wave's staff react as violently as it had with the panda?

Grant and the coyote pulled back and forth, not letting go of it while trying to wrench it out of the other's grasp. Thomas wanted to go help. Without a staff of his own, without magic to help him, Grant was

certain to lose, but he couldn't move with this dagger in his side.

Wait, the symbols glowed. That meant magic, right? That had to be why he was so weak, not the knife itself. All he had to do was pull it out, and he'd be able to help. If he didn't bleed out first. Was there any vitals stuff there that would cause him to lose a lot of—

The metallic snap was followed by something metal clanging on the ground. The wave of heat that followed dried the asphalt. Thomas stared, along with Grant and Heat Wave, each holding one piece of the metal staff, as a third softened the pavement under it enough it was sinking down. Then the cold returned.

"Kingsley," Lullaby demanded, sounding dismayed and fearful, "what's going on?"

"Help!" came the strained reply from the vole. The fireball between him and Gilbert had grown to three feet, and with a grunt of concentration, the armadillo took a step forward. The ball spread more against the wall Magnet was generating.

A note rang out and Thomas felt soothed as more followed. Everything was fine, the melody said, it was safe to rest, to sleep. His eyes snapped open with a cry of pain.

"That enough," Grant said.

Thomas watched Gilbert stagger back. The fireball was gone.

"No!" the raccoon yelled, followed by the snap of breaking wood.

A wave passed over Thomas, and all sounds vanished. Light rushed behind Magnet. Her mouth moved silently, and she gesticulated from Grant to the coyote, then Lullaby. The vole stared at the kangaroo, his expression turning from anger to fear.

"—before he gets his hands on our staves, too!" Light yelled in the vole's ear, causing him to jerk. She grabbed him and forced him to look at her. "Get us the fuck away from here, Now!"

The vole looked at the broken staves on the ground, then wrapped an arm around the vixen's waist. He raised his staff over his head, and everything metal not secured slid toward them. Grant ran at them, but only made it five long steps before the metal was flung away and the two of them took off in the air.

Thomas smiled to himself as he watched them vanish into the distance. Wouldn't it be amazing to fly? And on that dreamy thought, darkness finally claimed him.

Chapter 40

Red Deer, AB, March 2nd

Thomas moaned as a wave of well-being pulsed through him in time with the cock in his ass. “Wha—”

“Not yet,” Olavo whispered in his ear. “You make a sound and Limbani’s going to want in on this. I think you need further healing.

Healing?

The capybara pulled out, pushed back in. His motion was quick, but not hurried. A slick hand closed around Thomas’s cock and he reflexively thrust.

“That’s it,” Olavo whispered, “move with me.” He picked up speed, and Thomas had to fuck the hand quicker, too.

It tightened around his cock. “Oh fuck, the rat groaned as he came.”

“Oh yeah,” the capybara gasped, his cock deep in Thomas’s as, pulsing as the ass squeezed it.

He felt more awake, but this hadn’t come with another wave of well-being.

“I hear him!” Limbani exclaimed as the door burst open. “It’s my turn. He needs all the energy he can get!”

Before Thomas could even think of voicing his opinion, Olavo was out of him, and the rat rolled onto his back. His legs were over the monkey’s shoulders. “Welcome back.” The cock pushed into his ass.

This was definitely a good way to be welcomed back from where ever he’d been.

* * * * *

Red Deer, AB, March 2nd

Thomas staggered out of the bathroom, a grinning Armadillo in tow. He was going to need Olavo to heal him after that session. What was supposed to be him just cleaning up had turned into him against the wall and Gilbert fucking him like his life depended on it. It had been so hard that now Thomas thought his sternum might be dislocated.

“Everyone’s had a turn,” he said, eyeing the naked guys on the large hotel bed. The kangaroo seated by the window was the only one still dressed, and who hadn’t fucked him. “Maybe someone can tell me how the fuck I’m still alive?” He remembered Grant breaking his staff, which would explain the morose expression. Then, or maybe before, lethargy had hit him hard. There were bits of his friends fighting, Grant breaking another staff, them winning and...

“You might remember me fucking you,” the capybara replied, grinning.

“I doubt you did that in the parking lot.” He motioned to the room. “How did I survive to get here?”

“The truck stop we were at is across the road,” Gilbert said, pointing at the other window. Thomas moved to it and looked out.

Across the road was an exaggeration. Thomas had to search to find it, but it was only a block a way. The low building surrounded by pavement, with the charging station on the far side and the cargo trucks parked against the back fence.

“Where’s the police?” he asked, looking for a sign they had been there.

“They weren’t involved.”

Thomas faced the room. “They let you drag a bleeding man away and not one person called the police?”

“First off,” Olavo said, “we removed the dagger and used a healing sigil so you weren’t bleeding. Second. Money talks, or in this case, silences people.”

“Okay, but I was dying. I’m pretty sure you putting cum on me with that sigil thing wasn’t be enough to do that.”

“You weren’t dying,” Gilbert said, “just drained. And even if you had been at door’s death, this is a Marriott Hotel.”

“How does us being luck enough to come across a second hotel owned by Madoc’s family have anything to do with me surviving even if I had been dying?”

"The concierge in every Marriott knows with it means to be Society," Olavo said. "I told him who I was, which family I was from. We only needed to be escorted to the back so I could start healing you while the room was readied. If we hadn't had a healer, then he would have used the appropriate healing *phrase* to help you."

Thomas stared as the implication sank in. "So you can go anywhere and find all kinds of help at a Marriott?" When Madoc had told him his family owned the chain, Thomas hadn't expected every hotel could be used as a safe house. Catering to their sexual needs was the only aspect he'd considered.

"Pretty much," Limbani said, resting against the capybara. "Worldwide franchise, so anywhere in the world a Lewiston finds himself, he can be like home. We're just lucky none of our families have been locked out like two I could mention."

"Okay, fine." Thomas raised a hand to keep Olavo from responding to the monkey's comment. He had more important things to know than who did or didn't deserve to be barred from this place. "You all have safe houses, so long as you're on the good side of the Lewistons. Do any of you know what happened to me? I mean, a dagger in my side shouldn't have left me feeling like I just teleported to the moon. I was able to stay conscious until the fight was over."

"Your unconsciousness was because of blood loss," Gilbert said. "Not the *phrase* on the knife." He lobbed something at Thomas, and the rat identified the wooden handle and flinched away instead of catching it.

"Are you crazy?" He glared at the armadillo as the knife fell on the carpet. "That thing nearly killed me." Thomas looked at it as Gilbert walked to him. The knife was one solid piece of wood, with the dark red inscription written along the side, from the pommel to where the blade became too narrow to continue.

The armadillo picked it up. "It can't hurt you." He turned it and indicated the thin groove in the blade with branches doing to the edge that ended at the guard. "This needs your blood to activate."

"Any blood," Olavo said.

"We don't know that," the armadillo countered. "The *phrase* doesn't identify him specifically, but the effects have to—"

"It drained his energy," the capybara said. "That means anyone of us with that in them would be in the same condition as he found himself in."

"But they said that—"

"Can we stick to the important thing?" Thomas asked, cutting Gilbert off. "Why did they try to kill me?"

"This isn't lethal," Gilbert said. "I mean, other than the stabbing part, but she didn't target anything vital. The phrase is sadistically clever, but that wouldn't have killed you."

Thomas looked at the Armadillo holding the knife. He wasn't looking at it like he did his grenade, which Thomas felt was a good sign, but... "Why does it sound like you know what that thing does?"

"Because I know how to read," Gilbert replied, his tone darkening. He turned the blade, so the symbols were visible again.

"He doesn't remember any of that," Limbani said, which seemed to annoy Gilbert again.

"This is our magic," he stated. "On a weapon some other faction used on you."

"And by your anger, I take it shouldn't have happened?" Thomas asked.

"Shouldn't is the critical word," Olavo said. "The factions are insular. We each have our god and our overall outlook on the world is strongly influenced by that god. That means we have nearly no reasons to want to interact with other faction when it come gaining something relating to our god, so our power."

"Different filters," Thomas said, getting confused looks from his friends but a small smile from Grant.

Olva shook his head and continued. "For one of us to hand another faction something that can render us unable to defend ourselves?" he seems lost for a second. "Even if you trust that person not to use it on you, when the other families find out, the fallout is going to be huge."

"Not to mention not a lot of people know Thomas is one of us," Gilbert said. "The raccoon outright stated Thomas was a target." He stared at Olavo, who closed his mouth. "I doubt this would be anything more than a wood dagger if they used it against Grant. Even if this is something that was lying around in some war chest, why would they know to pull it out?"

"They saw me with Grant," Thomas said.

"But they didn't know you were Society, did they?" the armadillo said in an accusatory tone, looking at the kangaroo.

Grant shook his head. "Kingsley didn't see enough of him to work that out."

"Lullaby, the raccoon. She said they had a deal to hand me over to someone. They said they weren't

going to honor it, but—”

“Can we not use the codenames the pangolin chick gave them?” Limbani said over dramatically. “It makes it sound like they’re some powerful supervillain organization.”

“They are evil,” Grant muttered.

“Her name is Shila,” Olavo said, causing Grant’s head to snap up. “And as the one to run right into getting knocked out, you don’t have the credential to judge how powerful they were.”

“Can we focus?” Thomas asked, stopping himself from asking Grant how he was. There would be time for that down the line. “From what she said, it sounded like the deal was for them to collect and then deliver me to someone, possibly in exchange for something that would prevent me from helping Grant escape their grasp again. How many people do you know want me badly enough to make this kind of deal?”

That they had to think about it didn’t impress Thomas. Until he remembered they didn’t actually know him, whatever had been done to their memory had turned the bat into some background character in their lives instead of the one basically at the center of it.

“That Henry,” Limbani finally said.

Olavo nodded. “Madoc was calling him every day to update him. Since he wasn’t actually Raphael’s right-hand man, that means he was definitely interested in you.” The capybara considered something. “And as a Stoker who clearly is initiated, it’s not too much of a stretch that he’d know sigils and *phrases*. I don’t know how he’d know to contact this Chamber faction, but that could definitely be his work.”

“Why do you sound so certain?” Thomas asked.

Gilbert swore. “Because blood magic is what the Stokers did.” It snapped pictures of the knife, each side even at the end of the pommel. “That’s what got them destroyed. You have no idea the horrors that’s possible when you start dealing in blood without regards for the consequences. I need to get—” he stopped.

“What?” Olavo asked.

“I need to get this double checked,” the armadillo said. “But if this is Stoker level magic, there might be something hidden in there. But I can’t send that to my family’s archivist. I’m going to have to explain how I came across this.”

“You don’t want them to know you’re on an adventure?” Thomas asked.

Gilbert waved that aside. “I have no idea where Raphael is with letting the other elders know there’s Stoker out there. If I’m the one to make the revelation, that’s going to be one shit show I’m not going to enjoy.”

“Call that Madoc,” Limbani said. “He’s a Lewiston. He can get you in touch with their archivist, right?”

“Wouldn’t you have healed whatever hidden thing it did?” Thomas ask Olavo as Gilbert moved away putting his phone to his ear.

“If it caused damage, I healed that, but Gilbert’s right there could be a subtle effect hidden in the phrasing. Blood is extremely powerful. The phrase itself is written in blood, so they were serious about whatever effect this creates.” He was quiet again. “You said Grant was good at remaining hidden, but if this Stoker had even a drop of Grant’s blood, he could make them a scrying *phrase* capable of punching through just about any warding he could make. If they’ve been after him for any amount of time, and it sounded like this wasn’t the first time they nearly caught him, so blood is something they would—” he stopped and Grant’s quiet voice became audible.

“I don’t know, Shila,” the kangaroo said in the phone, tone flat. “Yes, I know.” Pause. “I didn’t plan it.” Another pause. “Kingsley is pissed.”

Thomas took the phone out of his friend’s hand and the kangaroo’s only reaction was to lower his arm.

“Shila, you—”

“Put Grant back on,” the pangolin snapped. “This is more important than whatever you think you need him for.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear the tone he was speaking in, Shila, but Grant needs a minute.” He disconnected her mid retort. He put the phone on the table next to the seat and crouched before Grant. “How are you?”

“It’s fine,” he replied in the same flat tone, eyes distant.

“Grant, looked at me.” The kangaroo didn’t react, so Thomas grabbed his shoulders and gave a shake, causing him to raise his head. “How are you?”

“It’s fine,” he repeated. His gaze was still vacant, and Thomas winced.

“What’s my name?” he demanded, shaking him.

Grant focussed on him. “Thomas.”

Thomas breathed easier. “Good. Now, how are you?”

“I’m—”

“I swear to God, Grant, if you say you’re fine, I’m unleashing Limbani on your ass.”

“I don’t do straight boys!” the monkey announced from the bed.

“Bullshit,” Gilbert replied. “You’ll do any guy you can talk into it.”

“I’m pan,” Grant said, then frowned as if he hadn’t intended to say anything.

Limbani opened his mouth, then closed it, taking his phone.

“You shouldn’t have told him that,” Thomas said, trying to not smile. “Once he looked up the definition, you aren’t going to get a chance to say no.” He paused. “How are you, Grant? Really?”

The kangaroo took a long, shuddering breath. “I don’t know.”

“Okay.” Thomas wasn’t going to argue with progress, no matter how small it was. “Why did you break your staff?”

“I...” he trailed off and his gaze went unfocused for a second. “I didn’t.”

“I saw you break it over your knee, Grant,” Thomas said cautiously.

“That wasn’t my staff anymore. I’d released it.” He fell silent. “I didn’t think it was going to work, but I couldn’t let the Chamber have it. To pass it from hand to hand, use its power to enslave others. I figured that in giving up the power, then destroying what had symbolized it, Kingsley would get the point.”

“Give up your power?”

“My staff was my connection to the universe, Thomas. There can be staves without a practitioner, but there can’t be a practitioner without a staff.” He looked at his hands. “Except...”

Thomas waited, but when the rest didn’t come, he prodded Grant. “Except what?”

“I took hold of Harrison’s staff. I wrapped both hands around the shaft and grabbed it.”

Thomas was confused for a second, then remember what Grant had told him, how own confusion when he’d watched the kangaroo grab the coyote’s staff. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

“There are encyclopedias worth of rule governing who can touch a staff and under what circumstance. But in the middle of a fight? While being wielded? I wasn’t thinking I was just doing. I should have been flung away the moment I touched it.”

“And yet you grabbed it,” Thomas said.

“But I don’t have a staff,” Grant said with the kind of insistence that screamed there was something wrong with the world. Then Thomas noticed the fear in his friend’s eyes. He tried to understand what about the situation scared him, but short of asking, he didn’t know enough.

But that wasn’t the kind of thing you went and asked someone about... Oh fuck it. “What are you afraid of, Grant?” he asked carefully.

The kangaroo swallowed. “There’s only one group able to take a staff that doesn’t belong to them.” He swallowed again, and then he continued. He was barely above a whisper. “What if I’m Chamber now?”

Oh fuck, he’d done it now. How was he supposed to help when he knew shit about the Chamber? Well, he did know one thing. “You broke two of their staves, Grant. That scared the shit out of them.”

Grant shook his head. “You don’t understand. I couldn’t have broken them.”

“I saw you do it.”

“What do you know about Hiroshima, Thomas?” the kangaroo asked, his voice trembling.

The rat had to dredge the memory from deep into his high school history classes. “One of two cities that had nuclear bombs dropped on them to end World War 2.”

Grant nodded. “There was a practitioner safe house about a quarter-mile from the epicenter. There was staff stored there, hidden so the Chamber wouldn’t get to it. When it was safe, Practitioners went there to take the remains, move them somewhere respectful. Instead, they found the staff completely intact.”

“Alright,” Thomas said. “I’m not up on my nuclear weapon trivia...” Come on, Gilbert, help a frat brother out here. You’re the fucking nuclear scientist here, not me.

“Little Boy,” Grant said, “obliterated everything within a one-mile radius of where it fell.”

Thomas swallowed, working out the kind of power that would require. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you did do it. And as the world’s first teleporter, let me assure you, anything is actually possible with magic.”

The words didn’t have the effect Thomas hoped for. Instead of taking them and rallying around them, he seemed to be shutting himself down. Thomas knew this had to be a crisis of faith level of screwed up, but it felt different. This felt like what he remembered of the time his parents had taken cared of Neil’s father after his wife died. “Tell me about your staff,” he said, remembering how his mother had gently gotten Stewart to speak about her.

The kangaroo stared at him.

"I mean," Thomas said, hoping this would be prodding enough, because after this, he was out of ideas. "It is at the center of all this, right? A ramshackle assembly of pieces of wood held together by twine, nails, and I think I saw duct tape, that's none the less capable of calling down tornados to level building and lightning to blow up vans."

Grant snorted as Thomas felt Gilbert's glare.

"It was never supposed to do that," the kangaroo said, and Thomas kept looking at him expectantly. Come on, keep going. "My staff was going to be about hope, not storms. I made it from what was left behind. From what people used to rebuild. Somewhere in there, there should have been this kernel of never giving up no matter how bad things got. Instead, I ended up with a tool of mass destruction." He shook his head. "In the wrong hands, Katrina would look like a spring shower compared with what it could have unleashed."

"And you kept it out of those hands, Grant. For as long as you could, and when you couldn't anymore, you let it go." Thomas place hand on Grant's knee. He could see the moment forming, how he was going to Hallmark movie his way into pulling Grant out of his depression. He opened his mouth—

"Fuck yes!" Gilbert yelled from the bed, causing both the rat and kangaroo to look in his direction. The armadillo was on the bed, the capybara's legs over his shoulder, pounding for all he was worth.

Thomas realizes someone was missing, and he found Limbani looming over him, looking at the rat and Grant with utter innocence, despite being naked and rock hard. The look of innocence shifted to confusion. "Is story time over?"

"If it is," a familiar, not particularly happy, woman's voice said from the television, "We have some important things to talk about."

"You're going to have to make it fast, Shila," Thomas said as the monkey pressed himself against him. "I haven't been able to find this monkey's off switch yet."

"Why don't you try a terrorist threat that's going to result in it being just about impossible to cross the border?" she said. "I already have Grant's passport set up with a physical version waiting for him at the front desk. You guys have to get moving now, if you want to have a chance to pull that ward trick on them a second time."

"Are you telling me to delay sex just because of a few terrorists?" Limbani asked, offended, then muttered something that sounded unflattering in his language.

"Is he for real? She asked, incredulously.

"If he's a mirage," Thomas replied, chuckling. "He's a very tactile one." He pulled the monkey up as he stood. "If you get dressed now, I'll give you dibs on me anytime you want from here to the border."

The speculative look Limbani gave him already made Thomas regret the offer, but getting moving was the priority. Which meant. He looked around the room.

"Okay, what have you done with my clothes?"

Chapter 41

Kansas City, KS, March 6th

“Are you sure you should be going with them?” Grant asked as they stood partway between Gilbert’s van and the hotel entrance.

The return trip had been surprisingly uneventful, if cramped. Along with Thomas, Grant, Olavo, Gilbert and Limbani, they’d packed in the three Chamber agents. Unlike Grant, who looked at the near non-stop sex with amusement and joined once in a while, those three had not enjoyed having that happen so close to them.

“Yeah,” Donal added. “I know they don’t mean you any harm anymore, but you’re welcome to stay with us.”

The squirrel had met them outside the hotel Olavo had set him up to stay in while they were away. Thomas was the only one Donal was friend with, and when they’d been about to leave, it had become apparent to the rat the squirrel might go back to the street instead of staying at the safe house, so he’d asked for options. Olavo had made two calls, and Donal had a room in this hotel, which wasn’t a Marriott, nor anywhere high class, but it still looked like a good one to Thomas.

“Madoc’s family is working on rescuing my family, and they’re trying to find someone able to fix our memories. And it isn’t like you aren’t going to be busy already.”

They turned to the hotel’s entrance, where Limbani stood, so eager he could be vibrating. He hadn’t said why he was going back to the room with Grant and Donal, but he’d been the first one out of the van. It was Limbani, so Thomas figured he’d seen himself having sex with one or both Grant and Donal, and now he couldn’t wait for it to start.

“He’s going to be disappointed,” Grant said.

Thomas snorted. “Don’t sell his vision short. And he knows that phrase that lets normal guys like you keep up with guys like us.”

“Normal guys like me?” Grant said, as if he’d been insulted, then chuckled. “Well, I’m still pretty sure I’m not going for an all week long thing with him, no matter what he claims to have seen.” He hesitated. “Look, you have my number. The moment things don’t go the way you want, call me and I will get you out of there.”

“And I’ll help,” Donal added.

“It’ll be fine. But yes, if I have to, I’ll borrow someone’s phone and call you. And you have Olavo’s number. If you need something, we’ll just be at the safe house catching up with the others. I’m sure the other than the sex we weren’t part of, they barely noticed we were gone.”

* * * * *

Kansas City, KS, March 6th

Thomas froze as he stepped into the living room on seeing the man seated in the center of it. The older rat had an air of angry imperialness as he looked Thomas over, then Olavo, who stepped to his left, before also freezing in place and straightening. Gilbert stepped around Thomas to the right, looking at him curiously, before seeing who was in the living room and going still with a soft curse under his breath.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Raphael demanded, and Thomas swallowed. He couldn’t believe how scary the man was, and he was there, alone, with no guards looking menacing.

“A friend of mine,” Thomas started

“A friend?” the elder demanded. Pushing himself up. “You abandoned your family for a *friend*? Do you have any idea the problems you gallivanting off caused? What? I didn’t have enough dealing with the mess Minneapolis turned into, you wanted to—”

“Mess?” Thomas asked, his heart racing. “What happened? Is my family okay?”

“We are—” Raphael closed his mouth with visible effort. “This Henry turned the Richard to his side. When my team got there, instead of dealing with a handful of kids in over their head, there was an entire security force waiting. The only reason I know everything went balls up is that Ettore’s power let him escape. Other than him, the reports I’m getting are that everything’s fine. This Henry you told me about’s a figment of

your imagination. Fortunately for us, the Richards are oh so very understanding of our presence in their city under the circumstances.”

“But what about my family?” Thomas asked.

“I don’t have any—”

“Find out!” Thomas yelled.

Raphael glared at him, hand clenched into fists. “I think that you need to be reminded who is your elder, and who is the boy. Hopefully, you’ll learn what your place is in this family faster than your brother.”

“My brother’s here?” Thomas asked, confused. “You said that...” he looked at the older rat in shock. “What have you done to Victor?”

Raphael smiled. “I brought him back to his family. Did you think I’d keep him from the privilege it is to be a Lewiston? To show him that his god wants him, even after being kept away for so long?” He snorted. “He doesn’t get how lucky he is, but he will. He might be stubborn, but he’s a Lewiston, and he’ll learn to love it just like the rest of us.”

“You son of a bitch!” Thomas was across the room, first raised and down, just as the older rat vanished from sight. Thomas had a moment of confusion. He was supposed to be the only teleporter, but momentum kept his fist moving and it impacted who he wasn’t seeing. Raphael reappeared, staggering back, “I’m going to —”

Someone wrenched Thomas away, and before he could teleport away, pain exploded in his wrist, then he crumpled to the floor, utterly drained. He saw the thick metal manacle around it and blood dripping from inside the cuff.

There were also a lot of booted feet. Where had they all come from?

A boot rolled Thomas on his back. Gilbert and Olavo were being restrained by men in body armor.

“I figured you’d get uppity after dealing with that brother of yours,” Raphael said, wiping the blood from his lip with a handkerchief.

“Unhand me,” Olavo demanded.

“Shut up!” Raphael yelled. “You think you can defy me? You think you get to just walk away from this? Take these two with the others. Have the ones at the hotel collected. Him.” Raphael looked down at Thomas with a malicious grin. “I’m going to deal with myself. I have such a—”

“Wow, they were so not kidding,” a new voice said. “You are looking to piss everyone off, aren’t you, Raph?”

“What are you doing here?” Raphael demanded.

Thomas turned his head excruciatingly slowly. A badger in a blazer stood in the archway, looking the scene over. Samuel, that was his name, Thomas remembered.

“See, when I heard Ettore was back, I figured I’d check in on him. You know, see if his cock’s still as fun, if his sense of humor improved any.” He paused and his tone darkened slightly. “If my family members are safe. You do remember there are two Mercier in Minneapolis, don’t you?” The badger forestalled any reply with a raised hand. “Don’t bother with the lied. I can hear you never gave any instruction about them. My elder is going to want to have a word with you, or two. Possibly three, once I’ve made my report. And don’t voice what you’re thinking, you’re already in deep enough in shit as it is. Any more, and you’ll have to swallow some.”

Raphael glowered. “Are you threatening me, Mercier?”

“Do I look like the kind of guy who makes threats?” Samuel asked innocently, then grinned at Thomas. “Okay, to you I do, but you’re still a kid. Give it a few years.” He looked at Raphael while Thomas tried to figure out if he’d even been thinking. “No. I’m not making threats. I don’t have to. While I was looking for Ettore, who I wasn’t allowed to see, by the way, I happened to overhear that you have two Xu and a Chouteau in custody. And now I see you’re planing to ass a Rowling, an Adesida, and the son of the Medeiros elder to your collection. Tell me, Raphie. Is it a death wish, or are you dead set on becoming more hated than even the Orrs?”

“They broke my rules,” Raphael replied, and Thomas thought he was trembling from restraining the shout, but he wasn’t certain he could trust his eyes, as exhausted as he was. “Covered up for them. They need to be punished.”

Samuel winced. “Oh, you have no idea how lucky you are I showed up before you got to implement what I’m seeing. Solitary confinement is way beyond what you can do to them.”

“This is my city!”

“So kick them out!” Samuel yelled back. Then calmed himself. “That’s what you do when one of us pisses you off. You don’t throw them in some dank basement with promises of ongoing celibacy. What are you looking for here, Raph? A war? Because you’re about to start one with five families.”

Raphael glowered. After a few seconds, Samuel opened his mouth, only to close it and grin.

“Well?” the badger finally asked.

“Get the fuck out of my city, Mercier,” Raphael ordered. “Take the kids without, and if you ever set foot here again I will—” he stopped, and Thomas thought Samuel was beaming. The elder pointed to Thomas. “He stays.”

What? No. He couldn't mean that. Samuel, Thomas pleaded mentally. You have to take me away. I have to rescue my family. I have to rescue Victor.

Samuel's expression fell. “Sorry, kid, but you're his blood.”

No! My family's Hertz, not Lewiston. I don't want to have anything to do with that asshole.

“What's not what it's about. What he's planning is all sorts of wrong, but I don't have the power to stop him. Don't even think of acting on that thought.” He rounded on Gilbert. “You want to help him, you talk to your elder. That's who had the power to talk this asshole—my apologies.” Samuel grinned toothily at Raphael. “This elder down.”

“If you aren't—” Raphael growled.

“We're gone,” Samuel cut him off and pointed to the door.

Olavo looked at Thomas and opened his mouth, but Samuel grabbed him and forced him out of the room.

* * * * *

Kansas City, KS, ???

Thomas groaned as the man moving on top of him came.

How many did that make today? This week? It hadn't been a month, had it? Thomas spend all his time in that state between wakefulness and sleep the manacle kept him in that the only way he had kept track of passaging time was by the number of guy who fucked him, and he'd been able to keep counted after sixty-eight.

Sometimes he berated himself for having stopped one short of sixty-nine. Others he thought that to have reached it would have been too cruel since not one guy had let him suck them off. All they ever did was help themselves to his ass.

At least he was on the bed this time. The guy before him had dragged him to the shower, fucked him before and after washing him, then just dumped him on the floor by the bed, his fur still mostly damp. This one had fed him food, then fucked him on the bed and left him there.

His first days of imprisonment, so long ago, had been without feeling fingers through his fur, the weight of another guy on top of him, or cock pumping in his ass. One of the guards, while the other fed him, had suggested using him, and the argument had lasted until they were done, and Thomas hadn't been fucked. The discussion had to have made its way back to Raphael, because Thomas heard the elder verbally ripped the guard apart a few hours later, through the door.

Other than the tone, most of it was lost to Thomas, except that Raphael's fear seemed to be centered on the fear that any kind of sex would give Thomas enough strength to teleport away. Maybe the man hadn't known how this magic worked, or hadn't bothered asking how it worked from whoever had made it. Not that it mattered. Thomas had still been drained to near unconsciousness, but not allowed to fall unconscious.

Strangely enough, Thomas hadn't minded at first. It had been nice to not have sex for a while. But only for a while. Within days, he'd wanted it. Not enough to ask one of his guards to do anything about it, but the hard on he was constantly sporting should have been an open invitation to suck him off, or fuck him, or sit on his cock, something.

A couple more days and he needed it. How ever the manacle drained him, his body needed to recharge him, and that came in the form of sex. Sex he wasn't getting.

Fortunately for him, Raphael must have been informed, because about the time Thomas was considering going made as a way of dealing with the craving for a cock up his ass, the elder came in and fucked him. That marked the open invitation to his ass and Thomas rejoiced in it.

Until it got boring.

Being fuck shouldn't be monotonous, and yet, that's what it became as guy after guy came in to take care his non-sexual needs, and in the process took care of their sexual needs. Not that foreplay was much of a thing with his frat brothers, but there was a playfulness when they fucked that was utterly lacking here.

Added to that was the complete disregard for his situation. They treated him as if he was no more than a toy, to be dropped where they were once they were done using him. Half the guys who fucked him didn't even bother cleaning up. And he suspected it was because the other half was in charge of his shower time, so it was

just happenstance.

Thomas did his best not to think of when he needed to go to the bathroom, since all he could do was croak for help and then be dragged there. At least they weren't letting him shit the bed he was forced to sleep in, but fuck, did it suck being an invalid.

The door opened and closed. Thomas didn't bother looking. That was too exhausting. He just sighed. Here he went again.

The hand grabbed his muzzle roughly and turned his head. Raphael smiled at him. "And how are you doing? Due for another recharge, I'm guessing?" He let go of the muzzle and Thomas's head rolled back to the side. "You have no idea how lucky you are. Do you know what some of the men in this family would do for the privilege of being fucked by me? And how often have I graced you with my cock these last weeks?" he patted Thomas's ass. "You do have an irresistible ass."

The hand rested on the ass, then grabbed hold and used it to turn Thomas on his stomach. Thomas didn't react to the pain. That took too much strength. The weight was on his ass, then his hole stretched as the cock pushed in. Thomas moaned. He didn't want to, but it was a cock up his ass and that was always good.

Raphael was thick. Not Chima thick, or even as much as Laurence, but enough Thomas felt it each time the older rat penetrated him. The thrusting started, and Thomas could keep another moan from escaping.

"You know," Raphael said, his thrusts languid. "There's something to be said for a docile guy." He slammed his cock in, making Thomas groan, then slowed again. "You could be considerate enough to tighten that ass, you know."

Thomas didn't. Even if he wanted to, he didn't have the strength.

"Got to live with the side effect of magically induced tranquility, I guess." The rat leaned on top of him and picked up speed. "You make a nice rest from that brother of yours. All that whining, all that crying. You'd think he was destined to be a monk or something."

Thomas's rage was deadened by the lack of energy. He wanted to buck the other rat off him. Strangle him, for that he was doing to Victor. But all he could do was fantasize about doing it.

Raphael picked up speed again, his cock slapping in wetly. He pounded Thomas's ass, then bottomed in, grunted as his cock twitched and sighed. Thomas felt the energy enter him, but before he could do anything but wish he could grasp it, it was siphoned away.

"You know," the older rat whispered in his ear. "You will be trained; you and that stubborn brother of yours." He nuzzled the back of Thomas's head. "I've located someone with the right power. Do you know what that power is? You're going to like it, considering how messed up your memory already is. This guy's going to fix that completely. Isn't that nice? No more messed up memory." He chuckled. "No more memories at all. You're going to be a blank slate for me to educate. You will know all the proper ways of serving your elder; with your body and your power. Oh Thomas," he said lovingly, "you are going to make me the most powerful man in the Society."

Raphael pulled out, stood, sighed as bones popped, and left.

Thomas didn't have the energy to wail.

It couldn't be real, he wanted to scream. He wanted to deny what the man had said. Convince himself it was a trick to get him to sink even more into despair.

But why would Raphael bother? Thomas couldn't escape, didn't have any secrets the older rat wanted. All he wanted was to use Thomas.

And magic was real, so why wouldn't there be someone out there who could erase him and make him someone else entirely? Maybe he wouldn't even bother making him into someone. Magic was real, so maybe they'd turn him into some magical automaton that had no choice but to do what he was told.

Thomas could cry, he discovered.

Crying took no energy at all.

Chapter 42

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Thomas hardly heard the door opening and quickly ignored it.

“Pass the mashed potatoes to your brother, Roland,” Their mother said.

They were seated around a table loaded with the food Nadia had cooked over the previous days in preparation for Thanksgiving.

“What can’t he get it himself?” Roland said, glowering at Thomas.

“Because you are a good boy,” Luisa chastised him gently, and with the usual mix of apology and grumbling their grandmother could engender in any of her grandchildren when she caught them being less than who she thought they could be, Roland grabbed the bowl and handed it to Thomas.

He put a ladle full on his place, then passed the bowl to Victor.

“Thank,” his older brother said, then, “what?”

“Nothing.” Thomas shook his head to chase the sense of—no, not thinking about that.

“White or brown, son?” Eric asked, knife to the turkey.

“I didn’t know Thomas started caring about the color of the cock he was sucking,” Judith said, filling her glass with wine.

“I’m not going to do that at the table,” he replied. “White, thanks.” He smiled at his father. It was so nice that he asked for what he wanted, instead of deciding for him.

“Right,” she drolled. “That takes place under the table. How about it, Roland? You want to unzip for your brother?”

“Have you washed?” their mother asked.

“Of course.” There was a tone of when don’t I make sure I’m ready in his brother’s voice that made Thomas stare.

No. Not going there. That isn’t how this goes.

“Right,” she drolled. “That takes place under the table. How about it, Roland? You want to unzip for your brother?”

“That’s sick, Judith,” his brother replied, disgusted. “I don’t let guys do anything like that to me.”

Thomas relaxed and ate. The turkey might be the best his mother had ever cooked.

“What?” He asked Judith, and she looked at him.

Hadn’t she called his name?

“What’s the name of that red panda?” she asked. “And how hung is he?”

“What red panda?”

“The one that lives at the—” she stopped speaking with the screech of distorted audio. And someone said something. A voice in the distance.

No. Not going back. Thomas didn’t want to go back out there. He was tired of not being about to do anything about what was being done to him. Here was where he was happy. Him and his family at Thanksgiving.

“I asked who’d that tall and muscular Hyena you’ve been boning,” she said. “Come on, stay with us, bro.”

“Ch—Steven,” Thomas answered, refusing to say that name. “Are you jealous?”

“Me? Jealous of my—Thomas—brother? Never, I’m proud that—something’s wrong—you get laid more than I do now.”

“What did you say?” Thomas asked. That hadn’t all sounded like his sister.

“Are you sure that—wouldn’t use magic—you’re entirely here?” She grinned at him. “Maybe you’re someplace else getting your—off his wrist—ass plowed?”

“No!” He wasn’t—the entire room shook. No-no-no. Why was that happening? He’d always kept how he was used from affecting the meal. Why were they taking that away from him? It wasn’t like he had anything else.

“—minute— Son?” his father asked, but the voice was wrong. He knew that voice, but it couldn’t be here. He hadn’t wanted that world to mar the meal with his family, so that meant he couldn’t be here either.

But he couldn't be outside either, could he?

Thomas swallowed and allowed some of it to seep in.

"—Donal, can you keep watch?" It sounded like Grant, but how?

"Sure, but I don't know how good I'll be at it." And that was Donal.

"How about you make sure they don't notice us in here?" How could that be Madoc?

"I don't think that's what I do," Donal replied.

Now that he let some of the outside in, he felt his arm being moved, his hand—no, his wrist—being turned.

"What does this say, Madoc?" Grant asked.

His wrists turned a bit more in each direction.

"That's a phrase to keep anyone but the person with the code from taking it off," Madoc answered.

"Code?" Grant asked, and terrified of what he might not see, Thomas cracked an eye open.

"Genetic," Madoc said, placing the wrist back on the mattress. "Cum of blood. Probably Raphael's"

The kangaroo searched through his pockets, making items jingle. "A key's a key, so all I need is one to

—"

"Grant," Donal said out of his field of vision. The kangaroo looked up. "Catch." Grant caught the item.

"Are you real?" Thomas croaked. Why did his voice hurt so much when he'd been talking with his family not minutes before?

"Thomas?" Madoc asked, as Grant looked at what was in his hand.

"Where did you get a key?" the kangaroo asked, then shook his head. "Never mind. At this point, that's just more of what you've already done."

Thomas shifted his gaze to the rat. "No. I don't want anything to do with any of this." He closed his eyes. "Go away. I want to be with my family."

"That's part of the plan," Grant said.

"But first we are getting you out of here," Madoc continued.

Thomas opened his eyes in surprise.

"Technically, Thomas will be getting us out of here," Grant said, dripping a liquid from a small packet over a key.

"What are you doing?" Madoc asked.

"I'm applying grape jelly to a key. The key represents the idea of unlocking something. The jelly is a fluid that's also sticky, so we get the idea of slipping into something, and adhering to stuff, two for the price of one."

"And the grape?" Madoc asked, sounding uncertain.

"That just happened to be the packet I grabbed out of the restaurant this morning."

"And what is that going to do, exactly?" the rat asked.

"I told you, slip in, and adhere to the right stuff, like the combination." Grant smiled at Thomas as he touched the key to the manacle.

"Do you have any idea of the number of permutation you're going to need to get the right ones from DNA?" Madoc asked, exasperated.

The manacle dropped off Thomas's wrist.

"None." Grant grinned. "The universe works on concepts, not math."

"Your magic's fucking weird," Madoc said, sounding creeped out.

"You still have magic?" Thomas asked in awe.

"Seems like it," the kangaroo replied. "Don't ask for an explanation, because I have no idea how that's possible."

Madoc traced something on Thomas's wrist and all the ripped skin and fur caused by the barbs inside the manacle as it moved back and forth healed.

"Okay, Thomas," the rat said, then took a breath and continued. "I know you've got to be fed with of being fucked by now but—"

"Do it," Thomas said. "I can't stand being this exhausted anymore and if that's the only thing that's going to fix it, then do it."

"He could fuck you, couldn't he?" Grant asked. "He is hard."

"Which one is faster?" Donal asked, and Thomas forced his head to turn. The squirrel was by the door.

"Is anyone coming?" Grant asked.

“Not yet,” Thomas grumbled. “Haven’t in...” he trailed off, unable to remember when he’d had an orgasm last.

“No, but I don’t know how that’s going to last.” Donal paused and closed his eyes. “I don’t how know to properly explain it. Right now, we’re in this zone where this space’s basically forgotten, but it’s got an edge, and I think it’s getting closer, so you guys are going to want to hurry this up if Thomas is going to be charged enough to teleport us out of here.”

“That explains why there were no guards,” Madoc said. “And with time being an issue, fucking Thomas is the best way to go. How do you even know that stuff?” he asked, massaging a lubed finger against Thomas’s hole.

“Donal’s staff puts him in tune with lost things,” Grant answered.

“Can you get on with it?” Thomas demanded. “It’s not like it’s been ages since there was a cock in there.”

Madoc moved and Thomas’s ass was stretched. “You heard the man, explanations will have to wait.” Thomas fought against retreating into his mind like he’d done for so long, and the sense of wellbeing he wasn’t entirely certain he wasn’t imagining, did help.

Madoc wasn’t gentle about fucking him, thrusting hard and muttering something about all his work being undone and how he was going to have to fuck Thomas for a year before he could get him to something resembling muscular.

When the rat came, Thomas’s moan was unexpected, but heartfelt.

“Donal, take your turn now,” Madoc said, “so you can go back to do whatever the fuck you do that’s going to keep us safe.”

“I don’t do anything,” the squirrel replied, “other than feeling about out there.” He motioned around them.

“Use this,” Grand said, offering the squirrel something Thomas couldn’t see.

“I don’t need any help having sex,” Donal replied, sounding mildly offended as he dropped his pants.

“You take too long,” Grant replied. “Look, you said it. We don’t have the time for you to work yourself up to an orgasm.”

“Have you two fucked?” Thomas asked as Grant kneeled to put a cock ring around Donal’s cock.

“What do you think?” Grant replied matter-of-factly. He stood and slapped the squirrel’s ass. “Go at it.”

“Won’t this be better if he enjoys it longer?” Donal asked as he got in position.

“Pleasure’s only a factor when it comes to resistance,” Madoc said, moving before Thomas. “It’s about the transfer of energy through cum. Being on the receiving end means you get a larger share of it.”

“Doesn’t that mean the guy who gives the cum also gets some energy?” Donal asked, pausing with the tip of his cock against Thomas’s hole. “Fuck, your magic’s weird.”

“Says the guy whose power is lost—” Madoc’s reply was cut off as Thomas pushed forward to suck his cock. Not being utterly exhausted meant Thomas didn’t have to wait for others to get on with it anymore.

Thomas moaned as Madoc took hold of his head and thrust in his muzzle, and Donal let out a sigh as his cock entered the rat’s ass. The squirrel was gentle as first, while Madoc thrust fast, but in no time, Donal grunted in need and picked up speed. Only seconds after that, Madoc was cumming in his mouth, and while Thomas moaned in appreciation of the taste and feeling stronger, Donal groaned and thrust hard, staying there as he emptied his ball, and gave Thomas another bump in his energy level.

It was enough that once the squirrel pulled out, Thomas rolled on his back without help. Donal handed the cock ring to the kangaroo, who put it on.

“On your side, Thomas,” Grant instructed. “Madoc, are you sure everyone involved in the exchange gains?” He stretched on the bed, his muzzle to Thomas’s cock and his to the rat’s mouth.

“Everyone in the Society,” the rat replied, moving around. “But that looks to be awkward.”

“You’re the follower of a god of male virility. Get it hard, get it in him, and make it happen.” Then he swallowed Thomas’s cock, and Thomas did the same with the kangaroo’s.

Part of him felt he shouldn’t be enjoying any of this. It was just more of the same as the unending days before, but it was like that first bite of food after going hungry for too long. He needed to have more.

Madoc wrapped his arms around Thomas as he pressed against his back and pushed his cock in. It was indeed awkward, as Grant’s cock slipped out of Thomas more than once, and Madoc had to hold on ever tighter as he fucked, but either through pure willpower on their part, or a god’s intervention, they soon came.

Thomas rolled on his back again, once Madoc got off the bed, and this time his mind was clear, his

body felt strong and he knew exactly what it meant that the naked squirrel was running toward him, their clothes in his arms.

“We have to go,” he said. “We’re just about out of time.”

“Just about?” Madoc asked. “Can you be—”

“I can only tell you the bubble of use being forgotten’s about to collapse. I don’t know if that means someone’s about to walk through that door, or someone on the other side of the building’s going to decide it’s time to come here for their fuck session.”

Grant grabbed his clothes out of Donal’s arms, but didn’t put them on. He and the others moved around Thomas as he got off the god-forsaken bed. “Time to get us out of here.” He took one of Thomas’s hand.

“San Francisco?” Thomas asked as Madoc took his other.

“Montana. The others are already there, waiting at the grotto.”

“Where to I grab on?” Donal asked, looking Thomas over. “And if you say his cock, Mad, I am smacking you.”

“You’re coming with us?” Thomas asked.

“I’m not trusting this new power to let me walk out this door, beside, I’m not letting you—” his head snapped to the door. He grabbed the rat’s forearm. “Out of here, now!”

Thomas shoved aside how much this was going to suck. He’s only just gotten his strength back, and now he had to give it up. Instead, he focused on the grotto, on the sense of safety he felt that first time he’d found himself there.

That, and feeling Grant fucking him.

The door creaked open, someone cursed, and the world shifted around him.

Chapter 43

Bozeman, MT, March 24th

Thomas wrapped his legs around the capybara's hips, tightening them to urge him to thrust harder. Olavo obliged, then came with a grunt.

The rat didn't let go. "How about you fuck me again? You know, to make sure I'm fully healed."

The capybara rolled his eyes. "You know you can just ask to be fucked without excuses, right?" He placed Thomas's legs over his shoulders, pulled his still hard cock out, then thrust in.

"Sure," Thomas replied, then grunted. "But," another grunt matching the thrust. "Where the." This one was higher pitch as Olavo change his anger and hit the prostate. "Fun in that?"

"In you ass?" Limbani asked, stepping into the grotto. "Keep me hard until Olav's done?" he put his cock at Thomas's lips and the rat parted them to suck on it.

The capybara came at the same time as the monkey, and Thomas sighed.

He shouldn't be enjoying this, a distant part of him said. He's been used sexually for weeks. He should never let a man touch him again for as long as he lived. Thomas firmly told that part to shut the fuck up as Olavo pulled out. He loved cock, and he was going to continue loving it.

He was going to cut Raphael's cock off if he ever came close to him again, but any other was welcome to his ass.

"Can I?" the monkey asked, raising Thomas's legs over his shoulder.

"Go to town on it," the rat replied.

So long as they asked.

Then it was Gilbert and, after him, Madoc. Last and nearly least, was Felix, who hesitated before asking and sounded pissed about having to do it. Thomas was magnanimous and let him.

Felix was no more gentle than usual, but Thomas didn't mind. He loved having a cock in his ass. Once the otter came, he unceremoniously rolled onto his back. Thomas looked around, expecting there to be someone to take his place, but it was only the two of them.

He almost asked Felix to fuck him again, but caught himself. Not because he didn't actually want the otter's cock in him, but...

He found he had to think about that one.

He never wanted Raphael to touch him again because he was an asshole on top of the way he'd used Thomas. Felix was definitely an asshole, and the sex was perfunctory at times, since the otter rarely cared if Thomas enjoyed himself beyond the enjoyment they all got from sex at followers of a god of virility and sex.

So why had he almost asked for another go? It wasn't because he felt forced, or had a craving. He needed the sex to power his teleportation, but there had been enough of that. This would have been just for the enjoyment of it.

The realization he enjoyed sex with Felix came as a bit of a surprise. The times he had the most fun with the otter were when he had him at a disadvantage, where Thomas had all the control. And yes, he enjoyed himself in those times, but this wasn't it.

Fuck, why then?

What was it about this, about Felix fucking him, that was so different from what Raphael's men had done, because now that he thought about it, Thomas wasn't keen on letting any of them touch him again either, if he ever found out who they were.

While he called the way Felix fucked him perfunctorily. They hadn't even reached that level with the way they used him and left him lying there. Like they just didn't...

"You care." Thomas looked at the otter.

"Excuse me?" Felix demanded, offended.

"That's the difference between you and the guys in my prison. You care."

Felix snorted. "Ol!" he yelled. "You need to fuck the rat again. The healing didn't reach that scrambled brain of his. Oh, right," he muttered, "he isn't here anymore."

"Where is he, or the others?" Thomas shivered. The fire in the center of the grotto was going down, letting in some of the cold air.

"That kangaroo friend of yours has been sending everyone to your grandfather's house when they were done with you."

"And you stuck around after all of them?" Thomas asked in disbelief.

"Hey, I wasn't going to have anyone claim I didn't play my part to keep my frat brother alive." The otter stood, grumbling something Thomas couldn't make out.

He considered calling Felix out on it. There was no way Thomas had still been dying when they fucked. A packaged shirt hit him in the face.

"Since you can be a smart ass, you're well enough to get out of here. Get dressed."

Thomas caught the pants and socks that followed. The name on the package was in fancy gold script that screamed wealth. "Underwear?" he asked, looking around for an extra package.

"Don't look at me. I didn't go shopping for you."

"Let me guess, it was Limbani," Thomas said as he put the pants on, then paused. "I thought he wasn't allowed to drive after that crash while he had a guy bouncing on his lap."

"What? No. He can't drive because he's always looking ahead to when he's going to be instead of the road. That's why he can't drive. Who told you that story?"

Thomas opened his mouth, then closed it. Henry had told him after the monkey had returned from the hospital. "Wait. Why didn't Olavo heal him?"

The otter stared at him. "Okay, now I'm getting worried. Olavo did heal him. You sucked the monkey off because he gave you that awful 'take pity on me' look you're always falling for."

"Okay, now you're the one with scrambled brain," Thomas replied. "I would remember it if I'd seen Olavo heal..."

"Now we know whose brain's scrambled." With that, Felix left Thomas to his thoughts.

He hadn't wanted to believe Samuel. It was obvious they were the ones with the messed up memories since none of them remembered Henry. That meant it couldn't be him. He'd been sure of that.

He finished dressing, finishing with the overcoat and boots. Everything fit him perfectly, and even stepping outside, with the low sun, they kept him warm.

"Glad you're back among us," Grant said, standing and putting his phone away. The chair he'd been sitting on was of the cheap foldable variety. Red and orange garlands were attached to the armrests. The kangaroo shivered. "I hadn't realized how cold it's gotten."

"Red and orange," Thomas mused, dredging up memories of art classes way back in middle school. "They'd be concepts of warmth, as in they are warm colors."

"I'm glad to see you're thinking beyond what your faction's about," Grant said.

"I traveled with you long enough to know better than to take stuff around you at face value."

"How do you feel?" Grant asked, folding the chair.

"I'm good. Who exactly is here? When you said the others were waiting, I thought Yating and Limbani, not Felix."

"They're all here," Grand answered, motioning for them to start walking. "Along with Yating's mother. My understanding is that there was an attempt at convincing her she should go home, and that she won that discussion."

"How are they here? Better yet, why? I'd expect at least Yating and Olavo, not to say Felix, to go home after they escaped Raphael's clutches."

"I expect they each have their reasons," Grant replied. "As for the how, lots of coordination. We couldn't officially stay in Kansas City, but we stayed as close as we could while we worked out how to get you out. Finding out was easy, with Madoc being a Lewiston, but it took Donal a while to get a sense of what it'd be safe to act."

"He's one of you, isn't he?" Thomas asked, remembering what was said during the break-out sex. "He's a practitioner."

Grant looked at Thomas. "Didn't you take me to him because you noticed his staff?"

"Limbani is who said we should go by the hotel, and we stopped arguing with him about what he 'sees'. Half the time I think he's making it up, the other half..." he shrugged. "But I don't know what staff you're talking about. The only thing Donal has is his collection of..." he stared at the kangaroo. "I thought that was just some stress relief thing."

Grant chuckled. "That's his staff. I don't know if he'd ever realized that what it does is magic. It's far more subtle than most staff I know of. But I sat him down, explained things and he's gone along surprisingly easily."

“He’d seen magic by then, having been around the guys.”

“That could be it,” Grant said, sounding unconvinced. The rest of the walk was in silence.

* * * * *

Bozeman, MT, March 24th

Gilbert’s van, along with two, better looking others, were in the driveway to Magnus’s house.

“Thomas,” his grandfather hugged him as soon as he was inside. “I am so glad you’re all right.”

“Thanks Grandpa. How’s everyone behaving?” Thomas was worried about the answer, considering the number of his frat brother in the house.

The older rat laughed. “Relax. I was your age once. They haven’t done anything I didn’t at one point.”

Thomas narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “With guys?”

Magnus shrugged. “I have experimented, just like every virile young man.”

Was everyone in his family bi? Well no, but were him and Roland the exception? Considering the number of women his grandfather kept around, he would never have thought he’d fooled around with guys. Wait a minute, did that mean that when the guys hit on him he—

“No,” someone called from the kitchen. “He hasn’t done anything with any of the guys here.”

Thomas’s head snapped to the door. Was—

“Of course, I’m here. You think they’d be able to arrange all of this by themselves?”

“Stop it,” Olavo ordered.

What was Samuel doing here?

“You have some rather unusual friends, Thomas,” Magnus commented.

“I’m not sure he counts as a friend,” Thomas said in a low voice. “He left me behind.”

“I couldn’t do anything about you,” Samuel replied. “Hey, just because you didn’t hear him doesn’t mean he didn’t voice it.”

“Thomas,” Olavo called, sounding exasperated, “might be best if you join us. It’s going to get annoying trying to tell about what he’s answering that I’m not hearing and what he’s reading from your mind.”

Thomas checked his grandfather for a reaction. “What did they tell you?” he asked when there wasn’t one.

“Magic’s real,” Magnus answered as they crossed the living room. “And that for the guys here, including you, sex powers it. Oh, and you can teleport.”

Thomas stare, nearly horrified at how frank the guys had been. “And none of that’s freaking you out, even a little?”

“It did, but your friends have been here fore a few days. I’ve seen what they can do, so continuing to freak out seemed like a waste of them.” He leaned in and lowered his voice, “and that hot red panda’s an amazing cook. You know if she’s seeing anyone?”

“She’s seeing my father,” Yating stated as they entered. He fixed his Magnus with a look. “If you are interested in her, you need to get his approval. And before you ask, it will involve demonstrating you can perform to a level that will satisfy her. To him,” the panda added firmly as Magnus smiled.

She snapped something in their native language, looking Magnus over appreciatively over her shoulder. Yating gave an annoyed roll of the eyes, and Samuel looked like he wanted to comment, but Olavo was glaring at him.

“Where’s Victor?” Thomas asked, fear creeping up.

“We couldn’t get to him,” Olavo answer with a defeated sigh.

“You can’t go back,” Samuel said almost before the Thomas was thinking it. “After your escape, Raphael’s going to have him under much tighter security and—” his mouth snapped shut and his ears folded back. Olavo was glaring at the back of his head.

“I asked my father for help,” Olavo said, not moving the glare. “But you and Victor are Lewistons.”

“We’re Hertz,” Thomas snapped the reply. “Not Lewistons.”

“Hertz isn’t a Society family,” Olavo said with forced calmness. “You are a rat and you clearly have Society ability. That means you are part of the Lewiston bloodline. Somewhere in the past, they lost track of your ancestor, but it doesn’t change the fact that you share their blood.”

“Lost track of my ancestor?” Thomas asked in disbelief. “You say that like it’s a common occurrence.”

“Not common,” Olavo said, “but it happens. Every family experiences times of chaos. I talked with the archivist in my family while we waited to be able to rescue you, and he told me that the Lewiston basically

disappeared from Europe, only to reappear decades later in the America. That's a lot of time for things to happen. For something as simple as one of them being unable to make the crossing and leave a son behind with no one to care for him. To a son being stolen while they traveled. It won't be easy to prove, or even possible, but that won't matter to the other families. The blood you share is obvious, and any story can be made to sound plausible."

"There is the possibility of a rat family making a contract with Him," Gilbert said from the table, where he sat, a large sandwich in his hands. "But that would require actual proof. The Orrs are the only example we have of a family doing that and they ended up with slightly different powers and rituals. You were initiated by our ritual. You have one ability, and while I can't be sure of it, since I can't trust my memories of you using sigils, I'm confident you'll be able to. Without compelling evidence that your family made that contract and somehow ended up with our exact traditions, everyone will say you're a Lewiston by blood."

"Fine, whatever," Thomas said. "But we can't just leave Victor there. Raphael said he'd getting a mind eraser to whip me and Victor into the shapes he wants."

Samuel opened his mouth, only to close it and look at Olavo.

"Go ahead," the capybara said with a sigh.

The badger smiled. "One, it's a person, not a thing. Two, said person isn't someone he can simply order to come do the work. I don't know him personally, but as someone with a mind power, I have heard of him. Mind wipers are treated with care. To have one go rogue is a dangerous proposition. Before Raphael can get his family to agree to lend him, he needs to demonstrate his credibility, which, after the way he handled the Denver situation, is basically nonexistent. So time isn't a concern when it comes to your brother being erased. More importantly, we have a way to ensure he can't rebuild his credibility, and guarantee he'll never be able to do this. No, he can't just get another one. There are no other mind wipers. Mind powers are among the least common of the powers within the Society, and among those, mind alteration power is the least common. Before this one, the last recognized mind wipers was thirty or forty years ago."

The badger closed his mouth and grinned at Olavo.

Thomas look from on to the other, trying to understand what was happening. He settled on the Samuel and tilted an ear. *Well?* He thought.

"He's an elder's son," Samuel said quickly. "Who might end up running a country. I thought that was just his father's hot air, but—"

"That's enough," Olavo said, the firmness of his tone undermined by the way he massaged his temples.

"Then what?" Thomas asked, looking at his friends assembled in the kitchen. "We just sit here and wait?"

"I'm not staying here," Felix stated. "This state is too fucking cold. If we're going to wait somewhere, how about we do it somewhere warm? Like in St-Louis?"

"If you want warn," Limbani said, poking his head through the open door. "We need to go to Cape Town. The city's amazing at this time of the year."

"One," Gilbert said, and Thomas breathed easier not to have to be the one to object. "We can't leave the country right now. Two, I am not setting for in your city, Felix. One of you is plenty, and what would mean leaving Miss Xu behind."

"I'll take good care of her," Magnus offered, smiling.

"Not before my father gets here," Yating stated, and stood straight as his mother said something that sounding like she was berating him.

"My home," Gilbert said, "is warm. It's within the country, and while we aren't the marrying time, we're raised to show women proper respect. Anyway, my family loves meeting new people."

"Are you saying my family's exclusionary?" Felix demanded.

"I mean my family as in my father and brothers, but since you brought that up," Gilbert looked at the otter. "Yes. You guys run your city with a fist nearly tighter than the Lewistons right now." He paused. "Well? Where are your objections?"

Felix's resolve faltered. "St-Louis isn't Houston. We do what we have to do."

"Why don't you just stay here?" Magnus offered. "The house's big enough, and I'm sure we can all agree to a certain level of discretion when it comes to the sex you have."

"Bad idea," Samuel said almost before the last word was out. "Raphael's going to send people to check this place out, eventually. This is the middle of nowhere and had no defensive capabilities. Some of the men he uses are on the ruthless side. Your best bet will be to tell them that we dropped by and left. The Rowlings have clout, so that means he can't just send people to raid them to get Thomas back. Add to that their connection to Denver and we can be confident they aren't just going to agree to Raphael's demands."

"If you're talking about Uncle Colby working there," Gilbert said. "You might not have heard, but he had a fallout with the Brislows."

"That doesn't matter. He was there when Raphael was kicked out, and for the mess that happened after. He'll be there to counter whatever the rat tried to sell his father." The badger looked at Magnus. "No, you can't protect him. In fact, the smart thing for you to do is come with us. The way he's desperate for men, Raphael might just order to have you brought to Kansas City."

"Wait," Felix called. "Why would Raphael be interested in him? He's Thomas's mom's father."

"I'm Eric's father."

"Meaning Society magic runs through your cum," Samuel said, while the guys exchanged confused looks. Right, Henry had them believing Magnus was his grandfather on his mother's side. Now there was incontestable proof they, too, had messed memories.

"After everything else he's done, I won't be surprised if Raphael initiates you, despite your age. He's desperate for me, and you can definitely still breed."

"Initiate?" Magnus asked.

"Sex with guys," Thomas said. "Lots of guys."

"Just thirteen," Limbani commented.

Magnus waved the comment aside. "I'll pass. I already did my experimenting."

"Raphael isn't going to care," Samuel stated, then closed his mouth audibly. Thomas stared at him, and the badger raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe you should visit one of your girlfriend's that out of state," he said, since he'd been thinking it, expecting Samuel to voice it. As safe as the Gilbert and Samuel made Houston sound, he wasn't sure getting his grandfather in a household where all the guys there would be fucking was a good idea. At best, Magnus would ignore what was happening. At worst, now that Thomas knew his grandfather had experimented, he'd comment on the technique, which would lead to the others demanding proof of the authority Magnus had to speak like that.

As unlikely as it was, Thomas did not want to find out his grandfather had had sex with any of the guys while in Houston.

"Yes," Olavo said, and Samuel closed his mouth. "If you won't come with us, it's best that you're not where when Raphael's men come looking."

"Fine," The older rat relented. "I'll make arrangements."

"Good," the capybara said, "then all that's left to do is make the arrangement to get us to Houston."

"I am not leaving my van behind," Gilbert stated as Olavo took out his phone.

"I have had enough of driving," the capybara said, scrolling. "I want the trip to be quick and uneventful." He stepped away, phone to his ear and speaking in a language Thomas didn't recognize.

With his grandfather going up the stairs, Thomas looked around for something to keep busy with until the arrangements were made. He took a step to the counter, only to be stopped by Samuel.

"Here's a free piece of advice," the badger whispered. "When Olavo's father makes his offer, say yes." He walked off before Thomas could voice the question, and this time, the badger didn't acknowledge the thought.

Chapter 44

Alvin, TX, March 25th

Thomas watched the stretch limousine drive away, unsure what to make of the flight to Houston, the drive to Gilbert's family ranch, or this heat, pressing down on him. He took off the jacket that had been bought for him once they landed in Houston.

It wasn't the sex that had made the trip odd. By now, Thomas expected the sex anytime his Frat brothers were involved, or their families it seemed. It hadn't even been that if he believed Olavo, Thomas had had sex with the future ruler of Argentina. That had been an experience in and of itself.

Ezequiel was a forceful man, but not in the 'I'm Evil' way that dripped off Raphael. If the capybara elder wanted something, he didn't resort to threats to get it. He offered so much to the person who had it that saying no became very, very difficult. He'd offered Thomas what felt like the world.

A country where he and his family would be safe from Raphael or anyone who might want to use them against Thomas. The protection of the entire Medeiros family where ever they traveled to and, of course, sex.

Fuck, did these guys like to make sex part of every deal with made. And if his experience with Olavo and his father was an indication of the rest of the men in that family, that was quite a promise.

What left Thomas confused was that other than a demonstration for his ability to teleport, before they took off Yellowstone International, his power had never been mentioned, or made part of the deal. Ezequiel hadn't even demanded an answer. He'd handed Thomas a phone and ask that once he made up his mind, call him to let him know what the answer was. The phone was his to keep, regardless of his decision.

The phone had more functions than Thomas would ever need, and one number in its memory.

"Well," Gilbert said, zipping up his light jacket, "I can now say I've had sex with two elders."

"Only two?" Limbani asked, pulling his own jacket tighter against him.

"My family doesn't go around having sex with every visiting dignitary," The armadillo said, turning and heading to the house.

The monkey scoffed. "I didn't wait for them to visit." He grabbed Thomas by the arm and pulled him along. "Think of it, Thomas. Once you're used to your power, you'll be able to drop into any bedroom in the world. You'll have sex with every elder." He lowered his voice and leaned closed. "Just remember to drop by my bedroom so I can go along with you."

"What?" Thomas asked, a nervous chuckle escaping. "I don't think I'm going to get to appear all over the world, especially not with a passenger. Just getting through a door wipes me out."

"Ah, but did you notice how it didn't seem to take any more sex to get you functional after you teleported through that door than when you teleported all the way to Montana with three passengers?" Limbani smiled. "So I'd say that so long as you'll be fucked on arrival, there are no limits on where you can go."

"I'm limited by having to know the place I'm teleporting to intimately," the rat replied, looking at the house. It was one story, but wide, like many of those he'd seen in westerns, it had a porch wrapping around the front. It looked more modern, with the array of solar cells on the roof.

"That isn't the problem you think it is," Yating said. "It won't be long until you are invited to all those bedrooms. Now that two elders, soon to be three, well, four." He looked at his mother. "I'm certain mother had told father who will tell our elder. News of you will get around and they will all want to get to know you." The red panda smiled. "Intimately."

"Can we keep this a secret?" Thomas asked. The idea of everyone knowing what he could do made him groan.

"Not unless you want Raphael to be the only one who knows," Madoc said gloomily. "Him, you can be sure isn't going to tell anyone until he has you firmly under his control."

"What are you all doing still back there?" Gilbert called from the steps leading up to the porch. "Hurry up, before Lim's cock freezes off."

"Very funny, Gil," the monkey replied, decisively unzipping the jacket. "This is no more than a cool day for me."

Thomas shook his head in amusement at the bravado on display. All the money in the world, and they still had to prove one was tougher than the other.

Gilbert had told them, in the last stretch of the drive, as he, Limbani, Thomas and Yating had dressed, that ranching was the Rowling's core business, with any other one relating to that in one form or another. More than half the families did actual ranching, just like his did. His dad, he'd said proudly, managed nearly ten thousand heads of cattle.

Olavo and his father hadn't bothered dressing since they were going to be on the road for a while longer before they reached the Elder's house. Limbani had complained about the need to dress, since there would be going to be out of them the moment they stepped inside. At the suspicious looks they all gave him, he shrugged.

"Who stays dressed inside their own house?"

"My father could have guests over," had been Gilbert's reply.

Limbani had pointed to Yating's mother, as if her presence while the men had sex in the car or the plane meant clothing was irrelevant. She had been quite unperturbed by it all, as far as Thomas was concerned, reading on her phone or watching a Taiwanese movie, or engaged in conversation with Grant and Donal. With being so less sexual, the kangaroo and Squirrel had taken it upon themselves to make sure the lone woman in the group didn't feel so alone.

It had even led to one instance of Yating pulling Grant aside for a talk about the rule for courting his mother. It was amusing how protective the panda was of her.

The armadillo and simply continued glaring at the monkey until he was dressed.

"Dad!" Gilbert called out as soon as he stepped inside the house.

Thomas made it inside just before an armadillo appeared out of a doorway. "You're home!" then Gilbert was on his back with the other, naked, armadillo on top of him.

"Get off of me, Charlie!" Gilbert yelled, trying to dislodge the surprisingly agile, if shorter man, boy? Thomas judged him to be around his own age.

"Fuck no," Charlie replied. "I haven't seen you in months. I owe you a solid topping."

"Ha," Gilbert snorted. "Like you can even get it up. No topping for you until your ceremony." Gilbert pushed him off, and Thomas stared. Not only was Charlie sporting one hell of an erection, but he was a wall of muscle. If that was what it took to join the NFL, no wonder his dad was pushing Roland so hard.

"That was two weeks ago, dork," Charlie replied, crossing his arms over his chest. "Uncle Gav told me and dad about the head scramble thing, so you're forgiven, but I will be fucking that ass of..." he trailed off as Gilbert looked at him, stunned. "Bert?"

"No." Gilbert shook his head. "No," he repeated, more firmly. "It's in three weeks. I only agreed to go looking for Thomas once I was assured I'd be here for it, no matter what happened. I was going to be your first after dad."

Thomas saw fear and hope in his friend's eyes. The hope died as Charlie shook his head.

Gilbert shook as he stood. His face turned hard, then his fist slammed into the wall. "I am going to fucking kill that bastard!"

"Hey, Bert, it's okay," his younger brother said. "We'll make it up."

"It's not okay," Gilbert snapped, then forcefully took control of himself. "I wanted to be here with you on your special day."

"I know. If you'd been able to, I know you would have been here." Charlie put a hand on his brother's shoulder. "You okay?"

Gilbert forced a smile. "Yeah. I'm just..." he sighed. "Anyway, that's Thomas, Madoc, Yating and his mother."

"Ma'am," Charlie said, tipping an imaginary hat, utterly undisturbed that a woman was seeing him naked and hard. She nodded in return without even looking him up.

Thomas just couldn't get used to how casual everyone was with nakedness. It had been one thing within the frat, but this was some other person's house.

"That's Felix, Grant, Donal," Gilbert continued, "and the monkey, in the process of getting naked and eyeing your ass, is Limbani."

"Oh, no you don't," the buff armadillo said, rounding on the monkey. "After four years as the family bottom, I am exclusively a top right now."

"That works for me." Limbani turned and raised his tail coquettishly.

"Before you two get at it," Gilbert said. "Where's dad?"

"He's at the plant," Charlie said, running a hand on the offered ass. "They're processing a few hundred cows next weeks so they're going over the equipment." He paused and look at his brother. "She's not here, but

Mom's in town. Probably at the elder's house. There's supposed to be some visitors there today, so they can use the help."

"Why?" Gilbert asked, shocked.

"Because she's mom, and she likes to help?" then Charlie rolled his eyes. "Why else would Dad invite her over for a visit?"

"I'm getting a brother," Gilbert said, a goofy smile forming.

Without a need for him anymore, Charlie threw Limbani over his shoulder and headed deeper in the house.

"Your brother did not have to leave on my account," Ru said, snapping Gilbert back.

"We've been raised better than to have sex in front of visitors. Come on in, I could use a snack."

"Your brother made it sound like the elder's house will be busy," Yating said.

"Grandpa and most of his sons are addicted to talking, so they enjoy their shindigs," Gilbert said. "Once Ezequiel tells Gav about you, he's going to want to meet you, Thomas, but he'd going to wait until most have gone back home." He pause by the room in which his brother had vanished with Limbani. His smile fell slightly. "Miss Guan, you can have the guest bedroom. The rest of us can spit between mine, Charlie, or my dad's."

"Your father's room?" Donal asked. "Won't your mother mind?"

The armadillo stared at the squirrel. "Oh, no, with the party she'll probably she'd come here after dad's done with work and he'll call her to let her know we have guest. She might come by, but she'll be sharing the guest bedroom with you, Miss Guan, unless that's going to be a problem?"

"The company of another woman would be appreciated," she answered. "After all this great company you have been."

Thomas looked around to see if the dig hit the others as hard as it hit him.

* * * * *

Alvin, TX, March 26th

The monkey walked by Thomas with a grin and not even a glance at the rat's ass. Owen, Gilbert's father, following with a satisfied expression, seemed to be able to sate Limbani, even if for only five minutes. Thomas wasn't sure if he should be happy or scared. Clearly the older armadillo hadn't unleashed all he was capable of on Thomas over the two days he has been staying in this house.

He sat at the island and gave Courtney a smile as she worked at the stove.

Gilbert's mother had dropped by the day after Thomas's arrival, and if the visitor disturbing what should have been time for her and Owen bothered her, she gave no indication, striking a quick friendship with Ru over a love of cooking. The red panda made advances on Courtney, was rebuffed with a smile, and they'd become friends.

A knock on the kitchen door silence d the room. Grant looked at the older armadillo. "Is there an office I can borrow? Me and Thomas need to take a call."

"Of course," Owen said, standing. "You can use mine." He led them to a large room filled with binders and spreadsheets. He cleared the desk and tapped it. "Just slot your—"

"That won't be needed," the pangolin said, her face appearing on the surface.

"This is..." Owen frowned. "Unusual."

She smiled. "At least you didn't go with *weird*. Thomas, Grant told me about your family situation. I did some looking around and—"

"Which family situation?" Thomas asked. "Victor or my parents and brother?"

"I have no idea what that's about," she said calmly. "I'm talking about the whole foundling thing and the Lewistons not knowing how it could have happened. It was harder than I expected, and I'll admit the universe might have been on your side for this one, because if not for those genealogy sites and all their transcribing the historian's records looking to connect people, and how those historians have been going through orphanage records over the last decade, I wouldn't be able to help you. But I can tell you why the Lewistons aren't coming up with anything. They're looking for the connection on your father's side, when it's on your mother's side."

"That's impossible," Owen said.

"With all due respect," she replied in a tone dripping with disrespect. "You're just here to watch. So, this starts in the middle of the first millennia with the Gray Church."

"The who?" Thomas asked before she could go on.

“Don’t worry about them. They don’t exist anymore,” she replied with a dismissive wave. “They went around and nearly wiped out everyone of you guys along with a whole lot more. Those left behind banded in tight family groups and scattered around the globe, bred like crazy, and give us those wonderful guys we have today. In all that chaos, your ancestor wasn’t the only one to not get the memo about step one. Yours ended up in Spain and died on the doorstep of an orphanage with a baby boy in his arms. They took him in, named him Vincente, and put him up for adoption. He was adopted by a loving family, my guess, since that’s not in the records, and I’m guessing he got married at some point and had children, not all of which were boys, since it’s my understanding that god of yours needs to claim you or some such for the rules to apply. Do you now get how the impossible happens, Mister Rowling?”

Owen almost fell in his chair. “How?” he swallowed. “How many children?”

“No idea,” she replied with a grin. “Hospitals weren’t much of a thing back then, and birth were tracked as seriously, or those records haven’t been digitized yet. But yeah, that’s one fun can of worm I’m handed you, isn’t it?”

“If she’s right,” Owen said, his voice regaining confidence. She snorted. “The fact you’re one of us means that the potential to be connected to Him was passed down to all of his children, even if he wasn’t initiated. Even if the potential could only continue through the sons that descended from him, the number of potential men Raphael can claim as his across the world is unimaginable. Should he ever find out...”

“Would he really kidnap rats off the street?” Grant asked.

“I don’t know,” the armadillo replied. “I’m not on a level of my family that deals with those things, but even I’ve heard stories. And not one of them paints that elder in a good light when it comes to controlling his family and the men in it.”

“He kidnapped my older brother,” Thomas said. “He chain be to a bed with the promised he was going to get my mind wiped, just to make sure we, me and my brother, would be nice and pliant.” Thomas’s stomach dropped. “Fuck, we have to tell my uncles. If Raphael figures this out, he’s going to go after them and do the same thing to Nerio he’s doing to Victor.”

“And on that thought,” Shila said, glancing at something on her right. “Thomas, answer your phone. The rest of us will see what we can do about them.”

“What?” Thomas asked, then his phone rang.

Chapter 45

Alvin, TX, March 26th

Thomas looked at his phone. The display didn't even have a phone number to indicate who was calling. He looked at the Grant and Owen, huddled over the desk, their voice lowered no to disturb his call, or to keep the kid out of the grownups conversation.

It ran again.

"Hello?" he asked, trying to mask his hesitation.

"Thomas?" was the surprised response from the woman on the other side of the call.

"Orinda?" Thomas asked, just as surprised, as who the voice belonged to registered.

"Oh, Thomas, it is you," his sister-in-law said. "How did you get this number? Did Ettore give it to you?"

"What does Ettore have... never mind." He glanced at the desk. He couldn't ask for confirmation, but things were adding up, even if, since magic was involved, the answer wasn't entirely 'normal'. "Someone's making sure I owe her one by making things happen I didn't even think to ask. When I... found out about Victor, I didn't even think of you or the twins. I'm sorry."

"You know where Victor is?" Orinda asked, desperation in her voice. "Ettore wouldn't tell me anything. He wouldn't even let me go. The only thing he did was give me this phone and strongly hint that I could free myself. He was right, but he could have been more direct about it."

"Free yourself?" Thomas couldn't find words for a few seconds. "What happened? Have they hurt you or..." he trailed off. The guys in the Society weren't sexually interested in women, but they had sons. Madoc had his with a girl he'd been friends with for years, but with how desperate Raphael was, would he limit the selection to willing women?

"They dumped me in this hostel where a bunch of women live," she replied. "The women here don't know anything about your brother or our sons, and the men who come by won't talk with me. They pick a woman go away with her and then return her. We're treated okay, but a lot of the women here are pregnant and..."

"Did anyone of them touch you?" Thomas, his anger rising.

"No, they didn't. None of them woman are forced to go with them from what I can tell. And they aren't brainwashed or anything. Anyway. Ettore was angry to find me here. Said that if I stayed, someone would realize I was there and add me to the list. When I pressed him, he said the other women are here willingly. They're contracted to carry their sons and paid well for it."

"But you're out now?"

"Yes. I didn't get what he was hinting at, but over the next few days, I realized that none of the doors were locked. That the men outside weren't really making sure we stayed inside. It took me a few days to sneak out. I don't have much with me, but I'm okay. Now, what did they do with Victor, Thomas?"

Thomas hesitated. How did he explain it? Had she seen evidence of magic over there, or did they keep that secret from the mothers? He decided to stay as vague as he could. "They're doing to him what they did to me. Don't—"

"To you? Thomas, what happened to you?"

"I'll explain later." Hadn't anyone contacted her? No, of course not. Henry had gotten his hands on his family within hours of Thomas leaving Minneapolis, and Thomas never made it to Magnus, and he was too busy being on the run without a phone to even think of letting his brother know he was on the run. Part of him thought the frat guys would have checked in with his brother and that would clue Victor in, but all it would have taken was a phone call from Madoc and a story about me saying I was visiting him or something.

"Thomas?"

Right. "Don't worry. We're going to get him back, the twins, and everyone in Minneapolis."

"Minneapolis." She trailed off. "Why are you saying that like that isn't where you are at the moment?" She fell silent, then. "Thomas, what in God's name is going on?"

He chuckled. "More than I think I could explain. And without doing it in person, you'd just think I'm crazy. I will do it, but right now, you need to focus on getting out of Kansas City. I'll speak with the person who

arranged for us to get in touch and see if I can convince her to send help your way.”

“Already working on that,” Shila said on the line. “Don’t get used to this. I’m not someone who does charity.”

“What about Uncle Neiro?” Thomas asked. “He’s going to be in danger, too.”

Shila sighed. “Working on that, too. Just because I don’t do charity doesn’t mean I’m just going to sit by and let an asshole rat kidnap people. Think of me as putting on my white hat while I’m hacking through all this.”

The call disconnected before Thomas could ask for details, or make sure Shila sent Orinda to his uncle. She’d be okay, he told himself. His uncle would be okay, too. Now, he had to add finding out where the twins were and rescue them to the ever-growing mess he had to clean up.

Someone knocked, then opened the door. “Guys,” Madoc said, and the armadillo and kangaroo looked up from the desk. “We could use Grant out here. Donal’s gone a tad weird.” Thomas looked at Grant, before following the kangaroo out.

In the living room, they found the squirrel, pacing and turning his toy—staff—in his hand, with something resembling a manic expression. Grant stepped next to him and kept Thomas from grabbing Donal when he went to stop him.

“Donal, you need to slow down.”

The squirrel looked up, but didn’t seem to see them. “I think—”

“No, you slow down.” Grant muttered something under his breath Thomas didn’t catch as Donal did another back and forth. “You aren’t ready for something this deep yet.” He paused and frowned. “How did you even figure this out?”

“What’s going on?” Thomas whispered, then wondered why he’d bothered.

“Oh, nothing much,” Grant said in a light tone that belied his earlier reaction. “Donal’s simply worked out how to talk with the universe.”

“Did you say universe?” Owen asked.

“Their magic’s weird,” Felix said, sounding mildly disgusted.

“We can discuss this later,” the kangaroo said, cutting off Owen’s question. “Donal Stop,” he ordered, and was shocked when the squirrel did so.

“I... I think I have it.”

“Have what?” Grant asked cautiously.

Donal smiled. “Their lost memories.”

* * * * *

Alvin, TX, March 26th

“Stop,” grant said, rubbing his temple. At least that had to mean the kangaroo had understood a little of what Donal had explained. Thomas hadn’t gotten any of it. “Run that by me gain.”

Or maybe not.

He and Owen were the only ones in the kitchen with Grant and Donal. Owen because it was his house and had followed after instructing the others to stay put. Thomas because Donal had grabbed him as Grant pulled him out of the living room.

“You said my thing—” Donal said

“You’re staff,” Grant corrected. “It’s not a thing. It’s a staff, Donal. You need to treat it with respect and reverence.” There was a tone of ‘I really shouldn’t have to say this again’ in the voice.

“You’re a lot weirder about this than I thought you’d be,” the squirrel replied. “But my staff is about lost and misplaced things, so I started thinking—”

“Never a good thing,” Owen said. “Don’t look at me that way,” he added at the glare Thomas and Grant gave him. “You were both thinking it.”

“And I wondered,” Donal picked up. “There is so much lost knowledge—I know, knowledge isn’t a thing, but you’ve gone on and on about it’s about the concept of stuff more than the stuff itself, and as suck knowledge—”

“Breathe, Donal,” Grant told him, and the squirrel took a deep breath. “So you went looking for lost knowledge and found something.”

“A lot of some things,” Donal said, his voice growing distant. “There’s so much out there.” He spun his staff and Grant took hold of the squirrel’s hand, careful not to touch the staff, but stilling it in the process.

“Don’t go back there,” Grant said, half a warning, half an order.

“But?” Donal’s reply had the hint of a whine to it.

“You aren’t ready for this. You’re already lucky you came back. Stick with what you have left, what’s relevant to us and now.” Grant said, his tone becoming gentler. “When we have time, I’ll guide you through the exercises so you can do this safely.”

“What do you mean, came back? He was right there.” He might have paced a hole through the floor, but nothing dangerous, like Grant’s tone implied.

“Remember that burning out we discussed a while back?” Grant asked, an edge to his tone. Thomas nodded. “Because we have to keep moving, Practitioners don’t have anything resembling the other faction when it comes to being organized. On top of that, we’re creative by nature, so we keep discovering different words or explanations for what’s essentially the same thing. I even came across a few texts that call it ‘apotheosis’ as if it was something to try to achieve, and yes, as far as I could tell, it was written by a Practitioner. What it boils down to is this. A Practitioner who dips too deeply into their power ceases to be.”

“Doesn’t the chamber have to be here and for someone to push too hard? Like they tried to do with you in Wyoming?”

“They engineer situations where we’ll need more power because that’s how we need to die for our staves to be of any use to them, but we can still overdo it without them around.” Grant motioned to Donal. “The only thing that would be different here is that they couldn’t take Donal’s staff for themselves. His staff would be masterless until the appropriate person could be found. Since that’s rarely quick, I’d start by building a safe house for it.”

“Okay, I’m staying.” The squirrel took slow breaths. “But I didn’t find something in there telling me how to fix Thomas’ memories. I don’t even remember any what’s out there.” He frowned. “I mean, I don’t think I do. No, what happened is that it occurred to me that if Samuel’s right, his memories aren’t erased. They’re moved somewhere he can’t access them. You know, they’re misplaced.”

Thomas exchanged a look with Grant. “It’s not like I can just think about it and remember where I put them.”

“Yes, but misplacing something is basically losing it, right? And that means it’s my thing, I mean my staff.”

“That makes no sense,” Owen said as Grant leaned back in his chair.

“No more than writing a symbol in cum makes magic happen,” the kangaroo said. “Every faction’s different.” He looked at Thomas. “I think he’s right, the concepts for lost and misplace do match.”

“Great!” Thomas stood. “I’ll get Madoc. It’s been killing him that he doesn’t remember his son.”

“It’s got to be you,” Donal said before Thomas took two steps.

The rat turned. “But he has to know.”

“Donal’s right,” Grant said. “Of everyone here, we know you’re the one with the fewer alterations. Not just because you are part of the frat for a shorter amount of time, but because they had their memories altered in a big way right before they were sent to hunt you down.”

“Won’t that mean you less to work with?” Thomas asked.

“I’m thinking more of it as less to screw up,” Donal replied, smiling. “This is a dry run. While I’m pretty sure something good’s going to come out of it, I have no idea what’s going to show up to make it more difficult.”

“Oh boy,” Thomas ran a hand over his face. “You guy know all I want it to be myself, right? It wasn’t my intention to go from being a rat to a quad guinea pig.” He was psyching himself out of it, wasn’t he? He sat back down at the island. “Okay, whatever you have to do, go for it.”

“Actually,” Donal said, now sounding uncertain, “I don’t know how to—”

“You do know,” Grant said.

“But,” the squirrel protested.

“You’ve been finding things for years. It’s why you have your staff, why you made it. It’s the personification of finding he lost, so let your instinct guide you.”

Donal looked at the kangaroo with incredulity. “Really? Use the force Luke. *That’s* what you’re going with?”

“Don’t knock the classics,” Grant replied with a grin. He motioned to Thomas, and the squirrel moved to the chair next to the rat. Clutching his staff in one hand, he placed the other on Thomas’s temple.

“Do I need—”

* * * * *

???, ????, ????

The world was dark and loud, a double beat that comforted him, warmth that kept him safe. The pressure had come and gone over and over, and he didn't know what it meant. It came again, but this time it was different. There was another sensation that came with it, and before he could match it to anything he'd experienced before, the darkness was replaced with light and the calming double beat with a cacophony.

Then he wailed.

* * * * *

Alvin, TX, March 26th

Thomas was up and away, panting, as the chair clattered to the floor. "What the fuck?" He swallowed, trying to piece together what that had been. It was so clear, as if he'd gone through it seconds ago, instead of...

"Did Henry erase my memory of being born?" Thomas asked.

"That seems excessive," Grant said.

"I told you I didn't know how this would go," Donal added, thoughtful.

"Can I offer a theory?" Owen asked.

"I'll take all the help I can get," the squirrel replied.

"I'm not going to claim I have any idea how you do what you do," the armadillo said, "but you said your staff is lost things, am I correct?"

Donal nodded.

"The thing is, when it comes to memories, we're always losing them. Will you're be able to tell the difference between one Thomas just forget versus one that was purposely altered?"

Donal slowly turned his staff in his fingers. "Okay, that makes sense. As for telling the differences, I might need a few tries. There's bound to be one," he added. "The concepts might be similar enough, but intent has to affect a concept, right?" He looked at Grant.

"That's muddier than I'd like. It's not like there's been experiments run to see what affects concepts and the limits of what one is as it approaches another. And in this case, since this is your staff's area, I'm inclined to go with your instincts rather than my knowledge."

Thomas righted his chair and sat down. "But worse comes to worse. I'm only looking at remembering the last eighteen years of my life, right? It's not like it's going to scramble everything in the process, right?" He eyed the kangaroo, who looked to Donal for the answer.

"Yes, that is the worse case scenario," the squirrel said, his confidence sounding forced.

Thomas nodded. "Okay, then we do this. Use me to work out the kinks, then Madoc gets to remember his son."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Donal asked. "You—"

"It just took me by surprise." He took the squirrel's hand and place it on his temple. "Do your thing."

Chapter 46

Minneapolis, MN, October 15th

Thomas sat in the front row.

“So,” the monkey in the front of the room said, “it was in 2023 that we had one of the worse case of a sexually transmitted disease jump the species barrier.” He nodded in his direction and Thomas tapped the screen of his phone. Limbani had added the app needed to interface with the class’s multimedia system, along with the set of images he’d need.

Part of the white board became a graph showing what Limbani said.

“Seven million people worldwide were infected with SRX-001, which was referred to by the media as sex-won. And believe me, that was not what they wanted to hear. Fifteen percent of those infected died of complications, only seven percent escaped with no effect, and the rest varied from full body trembling, so lovingly referred to as ‘the jerks’ because it caused the hands to move in a jerking off motion, to lesser version of it, to weakened hearts and respiratory system. Now, the important thing to remember is that this wasn’t cured. It was contained until it went away, just like the previous ones to jump the species barrier. What became known as the years of abstinence led to it basically starving to death, along with the dip in population growth that followed.” He nodded again and Thomas tapped the phone reflexively, hardly seeing the next set of graphs that appeared.

“In the thirty years since, there’s been eight documented outbreaks of SRX variants around the world. With the last one just over five years ago in Tanzania. Fortunately, the damage was contained and people isolated quickly, but this shows that using protection is important, because we have no idea who might carry the next variant.”

Protection Thomas had never used.

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“It’s why over the last thirty years, there’s been eight documented outbreaks of SRX variants around the world. With the last one just over five years ago in Tanzania. That’s close enough to my country that I immediately got my booster shot, and that’s why, if you’re planning on shooting off in someone, or having them shoot off in you, you’re going to do like my favorite lay over there,—” he pointed to Thomas and the rat’s ears burned “—and get your shot. Repeat after me,” Limbani said. “If you’re going to shoot in someone or they’re going to shoot in you, first get your shot.” He motioned, and haphazardly the people in the room, Thomas included, although he sank in his chair in embarrassment, recited it.

* * * * *

Thomas felt sick as he stepped out of the student union conference room, and he wasn’t the only one looking sick or terrified. Limbani had done a great job of explaining all the potential danger of a sexual disease jumping between species, from documented case to anecdotal stories to old folklore. He’d been so successful that Mister Heron had held him up. Now, Thomas headed to the food court, where Limbani said they’d meet up.

He dropped into a seat at a vacant table, getting nothing to eat. Just glancing at the fast food counter was enough to make his stomach protest harder. He looked at his hands resting on the table and tried to count the number of guys he’s had sex with.

How could Limbani, who'd research the subject so well he had numbers, casually toss out that they didn't just have sex with the person currently in their bed, or table, or counter, or against the wall—the monkey couldn't seem to help make light of the serious subject—but every person they'd had sex with before. How could he be so wanton with the guys he had sex with? No one in the frat used protection, not among themselves, certainly not with any other guys they had sex with.

Thomas might have had sex, through just the guys in the frat, with enough people to fill a coliseum.

"I'm going to die." The words left his mouth unintended, and so flat he might already be dead.

"Sorry about that," Limbani said as he over dramatically dropped in the seat next to Thomas. "Mister Heron just couldn't help going on and on about how he'd never seen such an effective speech, and he wants me to join him for the rest of the month." He grinned. "I said I would, if it came with that sweet ass of his, but he just laughed that off, so I think I'm going to have to try a little harder to convince him I'm really worth it."

Thomas stared at... a moving disease. That was what the monkey was. A vector of infection. Talking about infecting yet another person, because he knew the monkey, there would never talk of using protection. He just didn't give a fuck who died with him.

The hand on his thigh had Thomas jump to his feet.

"Thomas?" Limbani asked, seeming perplex. "You okay?"

"Am I okay?" Thomas replied in disbelief. He wanted to scream, but didn't have the strength. Maybe that was all the sickness Limbani had given him, finally acting. "I'm going to die," he whispered.

"What?" the monkey asked, standing and stepping toward him. He reached for the rat and Thomas jerked away.

"Don't touch me! Haven't you done enough to me already?" he yelled, then ran, ignoring the looks he go. He had to get away. It didn't matter where to, just away. Away from all the sickness the monkey had given him.

* * * * *

Thomas laughed with Limbani and their instructor, Mister Heron, as they left the student union conference room. The man had been so impressed with how Limbani had pushed for everyone to get their shots if they hadn't, or the booster if they had. He wanted him to be part of the other sessions for the rest of the month. Limbani had looked back at the gerbil's ass and said he'd consider it if they had fun afterward. Mister Heron had laughed it off, and they'd gone in different directions.

Thomas and Limbani stopped by the food court, the course having given them an appetite, and for once, the monkey hadn't suggested they sate themselves in a too risky location in far too undressed conditions. Thomas had been grateful until he nearly blew his drink out of his nose as Limbani placed a hand on his crotch under the table. Then proceeded to jerk him off while innocently enjoying his meal with his other hand.

* * * * *

Arms closed around him as he impacts someone in his blind run.

"I've good you, it's okay," Limbani said. Thomas had no idea how the monkey had made it ahead of him and he didn't care, just touching him had to give him some new sickness. Was there any the monkey didn't have? He trashed, but Limbani only tightened his grip. He couldn't be that strong. Thomas had gained plenty of muscle mass from the lifting Madoc had him do. Maybe it was all those diseases sapping his strength as they killed him.

"You killed me," Thomas said, crying. "You fucking killed me."

"Okay, I would love to know how you reached that conclusion."

Like he didn't already know!

Unable to run, or even move, Thomas's breathing slowed. "There are billions of diseases out there, you said in your presentation, all of them just waiting for the change to infect us, to kill us."

"I didn't say they'd kill us, and there aren't bill—"

"You never used protection!" Thomas yelled.

"I don't need it," the monkey replied casually.

Thomas shoved and was surprised when the monkey backpedaled. "What? You're fucking special? You're so good at sex, sickness don't bother with you?"

The monkey beamed at Thomas. "Well, yeah."

"Are you fucking insane? How many guys have you fucked? How can you be so fucking cavalier about the chances something you carry will jump species?"

"Calm down, Thomas. Look, you're going to have to take me at my word, but I don't have anything like that and neither do you."

“You can’t know that!” He looked around, ready to run again. They were on the bridge connecting the Minneapolis and St-Paul campuses. How long had he run to get here? “The lot of you just fuck whoever you want without bothering to use protection. Whatever you have, you probably gave to all of us, and I gave it to…” his voice trailed off and the realization hit him.

Arms kept him from hitting the ground. “Thomas?” Limbani called worriedly. “What’s wrong?”

“I killed him,” Thomas said, crying. “Our first time doing it, and I’ve doomed him to die.” He buried the wail in the monkey’s expensive overcoat. He’d killed his best friend. He’d killed Paul.

* * * * *

Thomas rolled his eyes as the monkey made a show of licking his fingers as they exited the campus. “Just the right level of tanginess to go with teriyaki.”

“You’re a freak,” Thomas replied, and they laughed.

The entire walk back to the frat, Limbani tried to get Thomas to fuck in really not appropriate places, but for once, Thomas had the fortitude to resist him.

* * * * *

“Henry!” Limbani yelled as they entered the frat. Thomas was barely aware of where he was. Only the ever permeating smell of sex clued him in. If he’d had something in his stomach, he would have thrown up.

“What’s happened?” The bat asked, hurrying to them and taking Thomas from the monkey.

“I have no idea. He freaked out about the sex ed course we gave and ran. I saw where he was heading to and caught up to him there. Now he thinks he killed Paul because he also thinks we all gave him all the sexually transmitted diseases out there. I tried to tell him we can catch anything, but I don’t think he heard me.”

“Or that he’d have believed you. That was sloppy of me,” the bat said. “I literally didn’t consider that as an outsider. He wouldn’t be familiar with how we’re protected. Fortunately, I can take care of that. Come with me to my room.”

“Oh, I get to have sex with you.” Then the monkey was running ahead, shedding clothing.

“What’s happened?” Yating asked, looking out from the kitchen.

“Nothing to worry yourself about,” Henry replied, carrying Thomas in his arms. “Thomas had a panic attack, so me and Limbani are going to comfort him.”

“Can I join?”

“I think this time it’s best if it is only the three of us. Next time, I promise.”

On the bed, Henry removed Thomas’s clothing then sat him between his legs. The monkey bouncing eagerly at the head of the bed.

“How about you suck him off?” Henry said, running his hands over Thomas’s chest.

“No,” Thomas whimpered. “I don’t want to get anything else. Please.”

Henry shushed him gently as the monkey wrapped his lips around Thomas’s cock.

“It’s going to be okay, Thomas. I’m going to take all this pain and fear away. Just let Limbani suck you off and then I’ll make everything better. Trust me, Thomas. I just have your best interest in mind. Just like before, everything’s going to be better afterward.”

Henry’s voice calmed him and Thomas grew hard. His protests died under the pleasure he felt as the bat playfully tweaked a nibble, and Limbani deep throated him. Thomas thrust in the monkey’s muzzle, unable to stop himself. It felt good, and that was all that matter at the moment.

Pleasure was all he wanted. Then, after that, he could deal with how miserable his life had—

He arched his back as the orgasm hit, and the teeth biting in his neck at the same time barely registered.

* * * * *

“And what have the two of you been up to?” Henry asked as Thomas and Limbani entered the frat.

“Nothing,” they hurried to answer, then giggled.

“Well,” Limbani said, then grinned. “We could show you.”

The bat raised an eyebrow and looked like he might turn down the offer. “You know what? Why not. It’s been a day or two since I’ve last enjoyed Thomas, and you’re always fun to fuck, Lim.”

“Yes!” the monkey was already running, shedding clothing.

“Can I join?” Yating asked from the kitchen’s doorway, licking his lips as he looked Thomas over.

“Next time,” Henry said. “I promise.”

Once in Henry’s bedroom, he undressed Thomas, then sat on the bed, pulling the rat between his leg. “Start us off with sucking him off, Lim.” The bat’s hand roamed over Thomas’s chest while he nuzzled his neck.

Thomas melted into the touches and sensations, moaning at the monkey's expert mouth closed over his cock, then was bobbing up and down it.

"Harder," Thomas groaned, thrusting in Limbani's muzzle, reaching back with hand to push Henry's head tighter against his neck. He shivered as the bat nipped at the skin through the fur. Then screamed as his orgasm hit.

Panting still, the back rolled him onto his stomach. "Remember how much you loved this, Thomas." And the slick cock pushed in his ass.

Thomas groaned and bit the pillow as the cock move in and out of his ass. Henry was a master at this, changing the angle to hit the rat's prostate, slamming in hard to make him grunt and build the pleasure. Thomas felt the orgasm approach just from the way the cock moved in him.

He knew Limbani was fucking Henry, because the monkey was loud and the bat was considerate that way. And he just made being under the two of them better. Thomas grunted in time with Henry as the thrust became more forceful. Then the orgasm hit in time with the bat nibbling at the skin of Thomas's neck through the fur.

Chapter 47

Alvin, TX, March 26th

Thomas groaned and couldn't tell if it was because of the headache what he'd experienced had given him, or the orgasm. What he'd remembered had been so clear, so real he now had cum on his stomach. He looked up as he realized Donal was panting heavily, and the front of the squirrel was gaining a wet spot.

"Are you okay?" Donal asked, the inside of his ears nearly as red as his fur. "How do you remember it?"

Thomas closed his eyes and tried to make sense of it. "I remember what really happened, but I still remember what Henry wanted me to remember. And they're both just as real." He looked at the squirrel. "I thought what you'd do would fix things, not make it more confusing."

Donal looked at Grant.

"This is your area," the kangaroo replied at the silent question, "but if you're asking me to guess, I'd say that unearthing the real memories doesn't lead to the false ones being buried."

"But why do they both feel as real?" Thomas asked.

"That could be because of how Henry does it," Grant said. "Is there any sign of how he did it in what you remember?"

Thomas touched the side of his neck reflexively. "He bit me."

"The Stroker were known for that," Owen said. "They were addicted to the power."

"He made me forget he had, though. That has to mean something, right?"

"Consuming blood is forbidden among us because of the danger the Stroker showed us it brings. If any of the boys at the frat realized he did it, they would sound the alarm."

"The important question, for what we did," Grant said, "is if you can tell which memory is real."

Thomas closed his eyes again. He remembered them side by side, as if two nearly identical movies were projected on the same screen. It was what led to the building headache. "I can work out what really happened, by some things they said. They wouldn't let me remember talk of magic, not even hints of it."

"Like Limbani saying he saw where you'd be," Donal said. "Yes, I saw your memories as you experienced them," he added at Thomas's raised eyebrow. "I wasn't in them, as you seem to have been, and I think that I might be able to increase the distinction between them in the future. There was a... tactileness to the memories. I was too overwhelmed to try anything with it, but maybe I can, I don't know, pull them apart as you remember?"

Thomas nodded. "Okay, then let's go again so you can practice. The sooner you are good at this, the sooner you can help Madoc remember his son."

Donal chuckled. "Hopefully, this time won't end in sex."

"I wouldn't count on that," Thomas replied. "If there's one thing you have to know with the frat, is that it always ends in sex." He grinned. "Just enjoy the show."

"Hopefully, this time it will be a show," the squirrel said, reaching to place a hand on Thomas's temple.

The motion and the rat's question were interrupted by the explosion that shook the house.

Thomas looked at Owen. "Does Gilbert have anything here like the arsenal he has at the frat?"

The armadillo shook his head, standing. "I had the bomb squad go over his room when he started college, and every spring after he goes back."

With a curse, Thomas followed the older man out of the kitchen. Grant would be able to keep Donal safe if this proved to be serious. Felix fell into step with them, then Madoc as they exited the house.

Two black vans were parked before the house, the sliding doors were open and men in body armor and holding nasty looking shotguns stood in front of them, along with an armadillo in jeans and a shirt. To the side, a pickup was overturned against the garage's doors.

Owen looked at the wreck, then fixed his gaze on the armadillo. "Laurence, what is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"He's under Henry's control," Thomas quickly whispered, "just like the others." Two rats and seven margays.

Owen glanced at Thomas. "He can do that? Turn him against his family?"

"Uncle Owen," Laurence said, raising his voice to be heard despite the distance. "I don't know what

Thomas or Gil told you, but you can't trust them. They tried to kill the Richard Elder."

Owen studied the younger armadillo and the men around him. "Then have them call Gavin, Laurence. It's something elders deal with, not thugs, and especially not with them throwing my truck around. You know how much work went into getting it working again, Laurence. It's a classic!"

"I can't do that, uncle," Laurence replied. "For all we know, our elder's already compromised by that kangaroo who's with them. He has mind control power. He probably already got to you. Just stand down, Owen. We have someone who can fix all your minds."

"Fuck this," a margay said, just as Thomas wondered how likely they wanted any of them alive armed like they were. The shotgun came up and Thomas didn't think.

"No!" Laurence screamed as the margay fired, but neither Owen nor Thomas were where he aimed, and the large window shattered.

Thomas caught his breath, holding onto the guard rail at the end of the porch.

"That was a fucking mistake," Owen growled. The armadillo jumped over the rail and ran toward the men still aiming at the front of the house. A glance told Thomas that Madoc and Felix had been smart enough to duck inside.

"Scatter!" Laurence yelled, jumping out of his uncle's path.

Three of the men obeyed the order, but one of the margay sneered as the approaching armadillo and planted his feet and readied himself to intercept the older man. In response, Owen shifted so his shoulder impacted the margay, flinging him aside without slowing, then hitting the man behind that one who hadn't reacted in time. The other two jumped out of the way and the armadillo impacted the van, causing it to skid a few feet before coming to a stop. Owen was lying on the ground, unmoving.

"I told you my uncle's got momentum!" Laurence yelled, running toward the downed armadillo. "Do you have any idea what my family'll do if he dies?"

"Blame the kangaroo," a rat snarled. "He's the one who mind fucked him into attacking us."

"What's going on?" Yating asked, looking out through the shattered window.

Cursing, Thomas was before the window as the men standing aimed at the panda. Before he could grab Yating and teleport them away, the impact at his back sent him flying through the panda and into the living room.

"I'm hit!" Thomas yelled, his back screaming in pain. "I'm hit! Get Olavo!" Fuck, the way his back hurt, there had to be a hole a foot wide in it.

"There's no blood," Madoc said, sounding scared. Thomas screamed as the other rat searched his back.

"Stop screaming," Felix said, "you aren't going to die." Something landed next to Thomas's face. A pouch the size of his fist that sounded like it had sand in it. "They shot you with a beanbag, you idiot. Just get up and—" the otter screamed as he was sent twirling and to the floor. He whimpered, holding onto his shoulder, a bean bag like Thomas; next to him.

"That's what you get for standing in a shooting zone, Felix," Madoc yelled, then lowered his voice. "No wonder you're always snipping him in that shooting game. I'm not Olavo, but as soon as I have you somewhere with cover, I'll use a healing sigil and you can take—" the rest of the rat's words were stolen from him by the wind that blow out of the house.

No, Thomas realized as sand was dragged into the house through the open door. The air was being sucked into the house? It was so bad Thomas found he had trouble breathing. He took as much of a breath as he could and looked around, trying to locate everyone. Felix was squirming by the couch, Madoc was pulling him, Yating was—

The flash of light flying out of the house came with a gust of wind that equilibrated the air so Thomas could breathe again. Before he could make sense of what had happened, it had looked like a fireball, but it couldn't be. A pissed-off Gilbert strode through the hallway with a glowing sphere in a hand and a giddy Limbani trailing behind him.

Thomas had to look away as the heat from the thing felt like it could singe his fur off.

"Gil," Laurence called, sounding worried, "stand down. You don't know what you're doing, that kangaroo—"

"What the fuck did you do to my dad?" Gilbert growled

"He did it to himself!" Laurence hurried to reply as Thomas dragged himself to the window. "You know his power doesn't protect—"

Thomas looked over the edge as the sun in Gilbert's hand flashed so bright he wasn't sure he heard the shotgun, or if going blind had caused him to imagine it.

“I swear on His cock, Lau,” Gilbert replied darkly, “that if my dad’s dead, I am going to rip you apart even if you don’t know what you’re doing right now.”

“He’s alive! I checked!” Laurence replied. Thomas wasn’t sure how reassuring he came across, yelling like that. “He’s breathing. And he wasn’t anywhere near that fireball of yours. Stand down, Gil and Nanko can look him over. He’s—”

A man screamed, and Thomas made out Yating, stepping through one of the armored men in spite of his heavily spotted vision. The panda grabbed the shotgun out of his hands and unleashed shots after shots until pumping it didn’t let him fire another one. He backed away as the others fired at him, only for the beanbags to hit and dent the side of the van instead.

Motion pulled Thomas’s gaze away from the panda, who everyone in armor was trying to hit, and to Gilbert walking down the steps, another sun briefly slashing in his other hand before vanishing into the closing fist. Thomas stared as a lance of intense light erupted from that fist.

Not only was the armadillo somehow able to make suns, but he could make a fucking light saber?

As Yating retreated through the van, dropping the shotgun, Gilbert was in range of of the men. Thomas dropped behind the window, having no intention of watching the bloodbath that was about to happen.

Unfortunately, even covering his ears wasn’t enough to stop him from hearing the screams.

* * * * *

Alvin, TX, March 26th

“Since when can you—” Thomas could only point to the groaning massacre the front of the house was, as a grim Gilbert stepped back inside, dragging his unconscious cousin.

“Always,” the armadillo replied in a barely contained snarl.

“What?”

“That fucking bat had me forget what I could do,” Gilbert snapped. “He fucking had me train over and over until I could make suns, then he made me a joke by just letting me remember the lighter trick.”

“But how do you—” again, Thomas’s words failed him.

“The monkey threw me at Donal with instructions to ‘do me’. Before I could deck him for thinking I wanted to fuck when my home was under attack, he said to make me remember something recent.”

Thomas looked at Limbani, who shrugged. “What? It’s what I saw myself say, then Gil here was going all Lord of the Sith on the bad guys.”

“It’s Jedi, asshole,” Gilbert said. “The Sith are the bad guys.”

The monkey shrugged. “They all use those light sticks, so what’s the difference?”

“I swear, Lim. Once this is over, I am tying you to a chair and forcing you to watch all the movies, including the Christmas special. You will not disrespect that masterpiece ever again.”

“About the going all...” Thomas closed his mouth at the glare. He’d heard about the Christmas special from Niel, who was a fan of old movies, so of that franchise too. He didn’t want to have to suffer through it.

Gilbert let out a breath. “They’re alive. The only thing they lost are hands and arms. One lost a foot. We can fix all that. They aren’t themselves right now, so I went easy on them.”

Thomas swallowed as he remembered the screams. If that was Gilbert going easy on someone, he never, ever, wanted to see the armadillo lose it on someone.

Chapter 48

Alvin, TX, March 26th

Thomas wished he'd gotten more than one of the armadillos writing a sigil on his palm as a form of healing, as he returned to the living room from a walk through the house. He'd been told it would heal him, and while a sigil like this had helped him heal from the abuse Raphael had given him, he was certain it hadn't done a complete job. His bad was still sore where the bean bag had hit him. What he wanted was Olavo's cock. That, he knew would heal everything wrong with him.

Unfortunately, the capybara had been pressed into healing Owen as soon as he'd arrived, and then seeing to the men Gilbert had dismembered. Olavo had been pissed at how casual the armadillo had been about cutting limbs, and it had devolved into an argument that ended with Gilbert walking up yelled about wanting to see Olavo deal with men pulling out pistols and firing them at him and not have to resort to something drastic.

Considering how pissed Gilbert had been going in, Thomas was surprised no heads had been lobed off. Olavo would be fucking each of the men multiple times before everything was grown back.

One element of luck, or so he'd been told by Samuel, who'd arrived along with Olavo and other armadillos, in Gilbert not killing anyone, was that it would avoid making the conflict with Raphael worse. The two rats who were part of the attack were Lewistons.

A discovery that surprised them all was that by the time they were pulling the unconscious men into the house, one of the margay had transformed into a badger; into Firmin.

Samuel had been pleased and annoyed at the same time. One of his relative was safe, but this was the kind of situation that could make things worse for Firmin, having impersonated someone from another family. Thomas had been confused by the badger and this had been one time Samuel hadn't answered his unvoiced questions, taking the unconscious badger to one of the bedroom.

From Limbani, he'd found out Firmin was a body thief, a shapeshifter who could look like other people, and that there was a history of them abusing the power. And that Firmin was in an especially precarious position because on top of looking like someone else, if they were Society, he also copied their power.

He and the man he'd copied had been those responsible for the air being sucked out of the house, and that had ended when Yating had phased through the van and knocked Firmin unconscious. It had saved Firmin from Gilbert and without two people to pull the air in different direction it had come rushing back in.

With the intel they could provide, those he charge had decided the Richards were to be healed first and then Donal was to restore their memories. That left Thomas and his frat brothers with little to do, other than each other, and Thomas had needed a break from that, the discomfort his back caused, after a while.

He looked up from where he'd dropped into a seat as a pair of armadillo entered. One older than the other by a couple of decades. The younger one noticed Thomas and nodded in his direction, then the two of them headed for him. Because of how much his senior the man was, Thomas stood.

"You must be Thomas," the older armadillo said, with a noticeable drawl, as he looked the rat over appreciatively. "Ezequiel tells me you're at the center of all this. I'm Gavin Rowling, this is my son, Colby."

The younger armadillo tipped his cowboy hat at Thomas.

"Yes, sir," Thomas replied, suddenly nervous at being in the presence of the elder of the family. He had learned the hard way they were men he didn't want angry at him. He decided not to wait for it to be asked. "I can show you what I can do, but if you want to be sure I'm not trying to trick you, we're going to want a closed room with a window or—"

"That won't be necessary," Gavin said, sounding amused. "You aren't some bull being put on display so you can be sold. I came here in part to see how you are doing. I grew up being groomed to become an elder in what was tumultuous times, so I know a little of what it's like to have so much happen to you because of who you are. It can be draining."

"That's one way of putting it," Thomas replied with a snort, then nearly teleported to the other side of the room afraid he'd offended the men, but Gavin chuckled and Colby looked amused. "Finding out I have this power literally put me in the run, and the first part of that was me actually running. It feels like I barely

stopped to catch my breath a handful of time since. I want this to be over so I can finally have one good night of sleep in my bed without having to be terrified someone's going to break the door down and drag me away to turn me into some mindless drone of screw with my memories again."

Gavin nodded solemnly. "I know Ezequiel made you the offer, but I want you to know you have a safe place in Texas if you need it." He raised a hand before Thomas could voice his protest. "This isn't an 'or' situation. You can accept Ezequiel's offer and you will still be welcome here."

Thomas hesitated, then counted on how at ease the men seemed to say. "I'm too precious of a bull to scare off?" He chuckled, hoping to take out the potential sting from it.

"And the analogy comes back to gore me," Gavin replied, with a chuckle of his own. "Yes. The only person who can teleport is someone I would prefer have as an ally, having you as an enemy would be too dangerous."

"I don't want to be anyone's enemy," Thomas said, then sighed. "All I want is to go home to my family and my studies so I can forget any of this happened."

"I'm afraid that last part isn't something you get the luxury of receiving," the elder armadillo said seriously.

"But you guys have people who can erase all these memories, right?"

Gavin considered Thomas before speaking. "Unlike Raphael, I'd never do that to someone. I can't stop you from seeking one of them out, but I'd like you to consider that not knowing what you can do, or what happened to you isn't going to make others forget what they know. All it will do is make you unprepared for those who won't have any compunctions against using you. We would do what we can to keep you safe, but if you no longer know about us, we wouldn't be as effected." The stretching silence, with the armadillo's gaze on him was too purposeful for Thomas to say anything. "I am only saying this to impress on you the severity of the situation you find yourself in, but I believe that forgetting all this would only lead to your family being in more danger."

Thomas nodded. As nice as it would be to act like nothing had happened. Gavin was right. He had—

"Thomas," Laurence said, stepping through the living room archway. He looked exhausted and looking like he's just stopped crying. "There's something I—" he stopped on noticing the other armadillos in the room, then he collided with Gavin, wrapping his arms around him. "I am so sorry, Grandpa."

"It's okay, Laurence," the elder said, embracing him. "You're home now. I'll keep you safe."

Thomas looked away as Gavin raised Laurence's face to kiss him. Colby cleared his throat and gave a nod to the archway. Thomas looked to the embracing armadillo, about to point out Laurence had come here to tell him something, and quickly looked away as the kiss had turned intense, and Laurence was pulling his grandfather's cock out of the jeans.

It was a reminder of how sex found its way into everything with these men. Colby cleared his throat again and this time, Thomas left the living room with him. When the armadillo stopped, he opened a door and motioned Thomas inside.

He stopped a few steps in on seeing the bed, and realizing what Colby intended. "Okay," he said, feeling the armadillo at his back. "I don't know why, but the only thing that surprises me with this, is that you bothered looking for a bed." He stepped forward to give the armadillo room, then turned and watched as Colby undressed, never taking his eyes off him.

Thomas's breath caught as he watched the muscular armadillo get naked, then at that hard cock standing straight. When he looked up, Colby didn't have the smug expression Thomas had often seen on very well hung guys after they exposed themselves, but one of hunger as he looked the rat over again. Then, as if the expression wasn't enough, Colby licked his lips, stepping forward.

"Come on," Thomas said feeling self-conscious. "I'm not that tasty looking."

The armadillo planted his lips on Thomas's the moment they were in reach, put a hand at his back and pulled him against him as the tongue parted the lips. The cocks pressed together as the tongues moved against each other for long enough that Thomas was panting when they broke apart.

Colby smiled, and said what Thomas realized was his first word since arriving. "Wrong." Then he pushed Thomas on the bed, and seemed to be a man relishing a meal after too long without.

* * * * *

Thomas whistled as he prepared a sandwich. He'd decided that while no one could hold a candle to Chima—and those memories had better be real—Colby came a close second to the hyena. After devouring him, the sex had turned slow and languid. It had looked like they were heading for a third time when Colby's phone buzzed, and after listening for a few seconds he'd started dressing, keeping the phone to his ear. He given Thomas the once over, looking like he wished he could stay, then left without a word.

Thomas would have loved another go, but two had also been great, so he'd headed to the kitchen, and here he was, about to satisfy another hunger.

"Can you make more of them?" Gavin asked, stepping into the kitchen with Laurence in tow. Thomas's gaze was pulled to the naked, older, armadillo. Gavin was leaner than Laurence, but much more hung. Even soft, it looked to be only slightly smaller than Colby. If he was a grower. Thomas swallowed and was happy the island hid his lower half from view.

The chuckle made Thomas realize that his face was as expressive as his cock in a case like this.

"After I've eaten, you're welcome to enjoy yourself with me."

"What? No. I didn't—" Thomas sputtered and gave up protesting. What was the point? He had been imagining it, and everyone in this house was more than happy to fuck. Then he noticed the way Laurence couldn't seem to look at him and all thought of sex vanished. "Laurence? What's wrong?"

Gavin looked at his grandson with a questioning expression.

Laurence looked from Gavin to Thomas, and his face fell more. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Okay," Thomas said cautiously, looking at the older armadillo for a clue, but he was as confused. "What for?"

The younger armadillo hesitated.

Gavin stepped away. "I'll give you privacy. I can—"

Laurence grabbed the older man's arm. "No, I need you here. You need to be here." There was pleading in his eyes. "You... I—"

"Laurence, it's okay," Gavin said, but the other armadillo shook his head.

"I did—" He swallowed. "Henry made me part of it."

Thomas pushed the plate with the sandwich he'd made to Laurence. "Eat. Take the time you need to figure out how to say what you need to. In the meantime I'll make your grandfather and me sandwiches too."

"Call me Gavin, Thomas."

"Not how I was raised," the rat replied, as he set about assembling more sandwiches. When he was done, and Gavin had his own plate, along with a tall glass of beer to the soda the older armadillo had placed before Thomas and Laurence, there was only one bite taken from it.

"I remember everything," Laurence started. "Owen insisted I be next once I woke up. Your friends didn't have a problem with that, and no one in my family other than grandpa argues with Uncle Owen in his own house." He looked about to take another bite, but looked at Thomas.

"When you ran and Henry sent the others to track you down, he had the rest of us cover so no one would realize you or the others weren't at school. If one of their dads called, we just told them they were busy fucking. Firmin would call them back, mimicking their voice." He frowned. "You have heard him imitate people, right? Even without shifting form, he loves to pull that act."

Thomas nodded, have watched as Firmin spoke with someone on the phone in a voice devoid of any French accent and sounding like whoever they claimed to be. The badger had even pulled one of Thomas, sounding like Roland in the frat's entryway responding to advanced from Madoc. If not for the other rat storming down the stairs as Thomas exited his room, Firmin would have managed to get Thomas pissed at Madoc.

"That and having your dad and brother drop by every other day was enough for him for a while, but then that video of you, the kangaroo and those others during the storm popped up and one of us showed it to Henry since you were in it, and he was way more entranced by it than it warranted. He locked himself in his office for an hour, and was on edge until this vole showed up the next day."

"Vole?" Thomas asked, ears perking up.

"Yeah, weird as shit with this walk staff he wouldn't let go of painted to look like it was made from those bar magnets I used to play with as a kid, with one red end. They were in his office for a few hours. I have no idea what they spoke about, but it had to be important, because Henry made me forget about it and the video."

Thomas racked his memory for Grant saying his name. "Kingsley?"

"You know who he is?" Laurence asked, surprised.

"I encountered him. He was in the video of me at that charging station. And I think you answered where that knife they stabbed me with came from. Go on, I'll explain my part after."

The armadillo nodded. "Then came you talking with him, and Henry went DEFCON 1 on us. He and Kuno made calls. Some of the Richards came over, including Kuno's dad. Kuno introduced Henry as a friend of his visiting the frat and looking to have a good time. Then things get stranger. We had sex, and when Henry

came in one of them, their behavior changed. They acted like they'd known Henry their entire lives."

Laurence shuddered. "I don't know which is creepier. Remember how someone changed so drastically and not being bothered by it, or letting Henry drink my blood because of course, it was just one of the things Henry did." Gavin placed a hand on Laurence's arm and the younger armadillo leaned into his grandfather.

"After that, Henry left the frat with those Richards. Thomas, twenty-four hours after your call Henry ran the Twin Cities. That's how easy it was for him to take control of the Richards. It's terrifying."

"Is he at the Richards estate now?" Gavin asked.

"Maybe," Laurence replied. "He was there for a few days, but then he came back to the frat. Now that I remember everything, I can count on one hand the number of times he left the frat. The only times he did was to deal with the deans, but only when he couldn't convince them to come to the frat for that 'talk'. But that he be at the frat or the Richards, he's gearing up for a fight. Battle down the hatches and all that."

"It's batten down," Gavin corrected.

"Okay, that all sounds bad," Thomas said, when Laurence didn't continue, "but you started this with telling me you're sorry, and nothing in that needed it."

Laurence nodded and took a breath. "First off, he didn't harm your family. That's one thing you don't have to worry about."

Thomas stilled. "But he did something to them," he said, his voice cold.

The armadillo paused and visually forced himself to speak. "He put your brother through the Ceremony of Vitality and of Submission."

Confusion stole most of his anger. "What does that mean?"

Laurence frowned. "Right, you never actually went through them yourself, or have us explain them to you. Fuck, figuring out which memories are real and which aren't is going to be hard." He ran a hand over his face. "Okay, that first party, you remember going around sucking off everyone there?"

"Well, I remember sucking some. Paul said I'd done the entire frat, I saw the video of me sucking off Chima. Most of it is kind of blurry." He frowned. "Did Henry change those memories for me?"

"Your friend didn't fix your memories yet?" Laurence asked.

"We did a test, I now remember what actually happened with the safe sex class Limbani gave, but before we could do more, we were attacked."

Laurence winced, but then continued. "Paul's right. You did suck off every member of the frat." He paused. "All thirteen of us."

"Ah," Gavin said.

"That's the sound of something important I'm not getting," Thomas pointed out.

"Thirteen is an important number for us," Gavin said. "Please continue, Laurence."

"Well, that was us accidentally putting you through the Ceremony of Vitality. Then there was the Ceremony of Submission, which we kinda, sorta, did on purpose." He avoided looking at his grandfather.

"You mean the hazing," Thomas said, raising an eyebrow.

"Laurence," Gavin said, offended.

"It wasn't bad," Thomas hurried to say, then blushed. "I mean, I liked it. Well, I remember liking it. Fuck, did I like it, or is it something else..."

"If it means anything," Laurence said. "You got into it real fast and yeah, you sounded like you loved it. Especially Chima. Once he was in you, it was like you couldn't let him go."

"That doesn't matter," Gavin said. "You were raised better than this, Laurence. Or is this something this Henry arranged?"

"No. It was Felix's idea," Laurence said. "Limbani was all about we needed to make Thomas a brother, because he saw it happen, and Felix figured that was going to scare him off when everyone else through Thomas would be fun to have around."

"So the thirteen of your, all fully initiated, fucked Thomas," Gavin said. "Yeah, that would be the Ceremony of Submission."

"Okay, but I liked it, so I don't get what..." he looked at Laurence as what the armadillo had said about Roland being put through that ceremony, and the way he'd apologized. He swallowed his anger. "You?" He told himself Henry was who had orchestrated all of it.

"Yeah," Laurence said weekly. "I was one of those who..." he trailed off as Thomas glared at him.

"Did you like it?" the rat demanded, and Laurence looked away. "Laurence, did you—"

"I thought he was one of us," Laurence said softly. "That he'd picked the frat to be with you. I know Henry made that up, but that's how I was when it happened."

"I'm going to fucking kill him." Thomas was up and heading for the door. "I am going to rip that bat's balls off and feed them to him."

Gavin blocked his way.

"Get out of my way," Thomas growled. "Henry had my brother raped by thirteen guys." He forcefully stopped himself from pointing at Laurence. He'd seen the pain in his eyes. How ever he'd felt while he was doing it, it hurt him to remember taking part. "I don't fucking care if he screwed with my brother's memories so he thought he wanted it, Roland's straight!"

"Thomas," Gavin said calmly. "Roland is your brother, that makes him one of us."

"He's straight!" He shoved the armadillo out of his way and left the kitchen, to come face to face with Firmin, and the sight of the badger shattered Thomas's anger into tiny, insignificant pieces that flew away.

Chapter 49

Minneapolis, MN, October 15th

“Calm down,” Firmin told the other badger, sounding like he was about to laugh. “No one got hurt.”

Thomas paused by the door to the second floor lounge, where Jacques was glaring at Firmin, phone up and screen so the nearly laughing badger could see it.

“That is you,” Jacques said, his French accent slipping in.

Firmin smirked. “They can’t prove that.”

“I do not care!” Jacques ran a hand over his face. “Do you have any idea what I will be told to do if the family hears of this?”

“Then don’t tell them.” Firmin noticed Thomas watching and winked at him. When he continued, he was speaking French. Thomas made out ‘c’est pas grave’ which meant ‘it’s not that bad’ he thought. His French elective hadn’t instilled that deep of an understanding of the language and it wasn’t like he got to practice it often. The next bit he thought he got was when Firmin roll his eyes ‘tu vas avoir the l’air d’un idiot’ he said in response to whatever Jacques had said, also in French. That means ‘you’ll look like an idiot’ maybe? Then Jacques had noticed his cousin glancing and turned, saw Thomas and slammed the lounge’s door shut.

They weren’t actually cousins, Jacques had explained that much. They were related through a common uncle, maybe three times removes, but as the only two Mercier in the frat, it was Jacques’s responsibility to take care of his younger relative. Which seemed to mean keeping out of trouble a lot of the time.

Firmin didn’t seem to care about the consequence of anything he did.

* * * * *

Minneapolis, MN, December 21st.

“Tu viens avec moi,” Firmin said, grabbing Thomas before he could unzip his jacket and pulling him out of the frat.

“I just got back,” the rat protested, but had to follow. Like everyone in the frat, the badger worked out, and Thomas hadn’t been at it long enough to match strength. “Where are we going?” he asked, admitting defeat.

“Alpha Omega Psi,” the badger replied.

“Isn’t that the football frat?”

Firmin grinned. “And they’re having a party.”

“I don’t have a costume.”

“That’s okay, you’re going to be out of everything minutes after we’re in there.”

Thomas stopped and planted his feet. It wasn’t as effective as he would have liked with the sidewalk still slippery from the packed snow, but it was enough Firmin paused.

“You’re not getting me naked in front of a bunch of football players.” Thomas didn’t reach to touch his eye, but the memory of the pain and the punch only dated back to prom night.

“Would I do that to you?” the badger asked, entirely innocently.

“Yes,” Thomas replied. “Or have you forgotten I heard about what you had Limbani do with the swim team?”

Firmin snickered. “Oh, yeah, that was a hoot. But it isn’t like I forced Limbani.”

Thomas pointed to the badger still gripping his arm. Firmin let go like it was on fire.

“But I’m not getting you naked in front of all of them. Just one.”

“That’s all it takes to get punched.”

“But he’s now—you already got naked in front of a football player?”

“What? No. I kissed him.” Thomas’s ears were burning, plastered against his skull as he realized what he’d admitted and to whom.

The badger’s eyes lit up. “Was he a good kisser?”

“He punched me,” Thomas replied.

“Was the kiss worth it?” Firmin asked, grinning.

“Firmin, I’m going back inside.” Thomas turned.

"This guy wants you," Firmin said and Thomas narrowed his eyes at the badger.

"One of them's gay and he wants me?" he asked in disbelief.

"One, football players can be gay. Two, have you looked at yourself?" Firmin looked Thomas up and down slowly. "You are a piece."

"What does that—never mind." Thomas bit his lower lip, curiosity pushing against Firmin's reputation as a troublemaker. "He's interested in me? I swear, Firmin, if this is you trying to screw with me, you're not going to have to wait for Jacques to kick your ass. I will do it."

The badger solemnly raised his right hand. "I, Firmin Mercier, swear that as a Sigma Theta Gamma brother, I will never do something that will endanger the honor of another brother."

"What you did to Limbani," Thomas countered.

"The monkey has no honor for me to help tarnish, and you didn't hear him scream in pleasure as the entire swim team went at him."

"If this is..." Thomas grumbled, but he started walking.

"I promise, it isn't, and you're going to love it. He's really good in bed."

"Are you pimping me out?"

"I would never even think of getting money in exchanged for getting you to have sex with someone."

"But a favor?" Thomas asked suspiciously.

"I promise, all I will get out of this is a sense of satisfaction."

* * * * *

Minneapolis, MN, October 31st. Alpha Omega Psi Frat house.

"Get naked," Firmin said as soon as he pushed Thomas into the bedroom, "I'll get him. It's just going to be a couple of minutes." The door closed and Thomas was alone.

Unlike his frat, this one was a two-story house, instead of four townhouses turned into one. This bedroom was on the ground floor, with a window looking out onto the well tramples yard. The walls were covered with pictures of professional football players, and a jersey for the college's team number thirty-one, with the name Harvro over it hung over the back of the desk chair.

There was not one thing in here that gave a sign that Harvro, number thirty-one, had any interest in fooling around with a guy. But maybe in a group bursting with testosterone, that was still something one of them had to be careful of.

The door opened and closed, and a well muscled jaguar in jeans and a flannel shirt looked at him. "You're still dressed." He had a deep voice, with a hint of a California accent.

"I," Thomas started. But the Jaguar kissed him hard.

"Never mind," the jaguar said, breaking the kiss. "Fuck, you're a good kisser."

"You too," Thomas said, grinning and breathless.

"One thing, before we do this. No one can know, got that? Not one person. I don't care how much you trust them. This isn't something anyone on the team can ever hear about."

"Then maybe we shouldn't—"

The jaguar kissed him again, hard, then was pulling Thomas's jacket off. Thomas considered bringing this to a stop. He didn't taste alcohol, but maybe he'd had something else and he—

He squeaked in the kiss as the hand in his pants squeezed his cock and balls. Instantly, he was hard as the jaguar stroked him, squeezing just the way Thomas liked. Fuck, had Firmin told this guy all his buttons? He ripped the shirt off the jaguar, then backed them to the bed, falling back and pulling him along.

He reached back and undid the tail strap, then he too had his hand around the already hard cock. The jaguar was nicely hung. That was going to feel great in him.

The jaguar broke the kiss and pushed off, then pulled the pants off Thomas before getting out of his own. He looked Thomas over slowly and licked his lips. Then he was between his legs, the muzzle closing around the rat's cock.

"Oh fuck," Thomas whispered, then let his head fall back as the Jaguar deep throated him. He had to have sworn a lot of guys to secrecy to be that good as sucking cock. Then he moaned as the jaguar bobbed his head up and down.

Thomas put both hands on the head and thrusts. That was one good muzzle to fuck. Thomas groaned and picked up speed, but then the jaguar was off his cock.

"You're ready," he said, then got on his back on the bed next to Thomas. "Come on. I want you to fuck me."

"You want me to fuck you?" Thomas asked, not entirely sure what had just happened.

"Oh yeah. Firmin told me how great you are, and you have no idea how much of a turn on it was to hear him talk. I've wanted this since."

Thomas was going to have to explain how he felt about the badger sharing the sex they had with strangers. He moved and put the jaguar's legs over his shoulders. But after he'd enjoyed this.

"Lube?" he asked.

"Don't worry, I'm good."

Thomas tilted an ear. That was another level of eager. He pushed, and the well lubed ass took him in to a groan from the jaguar that had enough bass, the window vibrated. Thomas swore under his breath as the ass tightened around his cock. Fuck, this guy was an expert.

Thomas pushed until he bottomed, then pulled out and sunk back in. He needed the second or two of air to keep from cumming too fast with how good that ass was. The jaguar was loud in his enjoyment, urging Thomas to go faster and harder. The rat obliged, and quickly enough, he grunted, shoved his cock as deep as it went and came.

"Fuck yeah," he whispered, letting the legs slip around him and falling on top of the jaguar.

"That was amazing."

"You're an expert at this," Thomas replied.

The jaguar shifted, and Thomas was on his back. Instead of getting between his legs, the jaguar got off the bed and grabbed his pants.

"Aren't you going to fuck me?" Thomas asked. "You're still hard and leaking."

"I don't." The jaguar shook his head bashfully.

"At least let me suck you off."

"I can't. I have to get back before anyone notices I'm gone. Remember, absolutely no one can know about this." He put the flannel shirt on.

"Yeah, sure." It was the guy's decision.

"You should get dressed. I'll find Firmin and he'll help you leave without attracting attention."

Thomas was alone again, but bemused this time. He's seen old movies of guys sneaking into and out girl's rooms when they weren't supposed to be there, but he'd never thought it happened for real, or to him. Although he was the one in the room he shouldn't be in.

He dressed, then had to wait ten minutes before Firmin sneaked in, fur damp and grinning.

"Had fun?" the badger asked.

"I wasn't the only one, it seems."

"Did you think you were the only one in demand?" Firmin asked with a smirk. "Guys love this." He grabbed his jeans covered crotch.

"Yeah, we do," Thomas agreed. "Should I grab a shower, too?"

"You can have one once we're back at the frat. I'll even scrub your back."

* * * * *

Minneapolis, MN, November 1st. Sigma Theta Gamma Frat house.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" the jaguar yelled at Thomas, held back by Olavo. "I don't know how you did it, but I'm going to fucking kill you and whoever it is that you used as me and whoever recorded the vid and uploaded it!"

"I didn't—"

"Don't fucking lie to me!"

"You—" Thomas started, then shut his mouth. He'd agreed not to divulge what they'd done, and he was going to keep his side of the agreement. Even if he had no idea what was going on right now.

"Oh," the jaguar said hatefully, looking over Thomas's shoulder. "This was your doing, you fucking badger. You are so next."

Thomas turned and Firmin was leaning against the wall but the archway to the living room, a satisfied smirk on his face. Further down the hall, Jacques was glaring daggers at the back of the badger's head. And behind him, Henry was coming down the steps, not looking amused.

"What is going on?" he demanded.

"Oops," Firmin said with a chuckle.

"They're making me look like a fag!" the jaguar yelled.

"You're coming with me," Jacques said, grabbing Firmin by the arm. "I can't believe you—"

"That's enough, Jacques," Henry said, approaching. "This is my house. If there is punishment to be administered, I will be the one to do it." Henry looked the situation over. "Thomas, I think that under the circumstances, it's best if you retire to your room."

"Don't let him—"

"That is enough out of you," Henry said in a tone severe enough the jaguar's muzzle shut audibly. "I will speak with you in due time. Olavo, please escort him to the kitchen. Hopefully, some food will settle his mood. I believe there is still some of that meatloaf left from last night." He looked at Firmin. "You will accompany me to my office."

The badger looked nowhere near as afraid as Thomas felt he should after being talked to like that.

* * * * *

Alvin, TX, March 26th

The badger standing before Thomas looked exactly like Firmin, physically. The fur was the same, down to that rebel patch on his side, but that was it. But it was like that was only a shell over the remnant of someone. Thomas couldn't see any of the carefree badger in those glassy, sad eyes.

Knowing what he now knew of Firmin's power, he suspected some of that came from his ability to be anyone he wanted when he was doing something he shouldn't. Now, Firmin looked he'd he's seen the atrocities of war. No, had lived them and survived when he would have rather never have come back.

Thomas looked at the others in the hall, hoping one of them could explain. Donal was holding onto the doorframe of the office, wearing a muted version of Firmin's haunted expression. Now he knew what had happened. The question was, what had Donal brought to the surface of the badger's memories.

He looked at Samuel, who shook his head before Thomas voiced the question. He looked somber. Just like the mind reading badger had been reminiscent of a playful Firmin, now he too looked like he'd lived...

Mind reader. Fuck, he knew whatever Firmin remembered and it looked painful.

Thomas opened his mouth, unsure what might come out, but Gilbert spoke first.

"Yes, that's what we need," the armadillo said, stepping out of a doorway and pausing, looking at the scene. He seemed to remember the phone. "That's fine, Colby. Just send me the file. I need to go. We have a situation here."

"You bring them up on the Stoker history," Samuel said. "I have to talk with Firmin, and make calls." He reached for the badger, who recoiled. "I'm on your side, Firmin. I swear. I won't let them hold you responsible for what that monster made you do."

Chapter 50

Alvin, TX, March 26th

Thomas sat on the couch with Limbani on one side and Madoc on the other, and there was not even the hint of something sexual about to happen. Olavo sat opposite them on a love seat with Yating next to him. Felix and Laurence were on the third seat. Gavin sat in the lone seat that didn't allow more than one person on it and watched Gilbert pace the length of the living room, reading from his phone.

That was seven of his frat brother, eight Society men, naked, and not one hard cock. Thomas didn't know if it was a first for this group, but it certainly was one for him.

"Okay." Gilbert stopped before the archway and faced them. "Thomas, you're not going to know about some of this, but this all started with the war against the Gray Church five or so years ago."

Thomas thought back to when he was thirteen. "That's when the bump up in antigay rhetoric happened, right? That died down pretty quick."

"That was part of it. One of us can explain it in more details later. But with every family in danger, a lot of them figured sending sons away would help increase the chances our lines survived no matter what happened. Some of my cousins were sent to study overseas. Uncle Colby was in Denver and one of Dennis's son was sent to San Francisco Bay. Dad sent me to Minnesota to study at UMn. That's where I mean Hubert Heindrick."

"You mean Henry," Madoc said.

"Hubert was the guy in charge of the Frat then. Not that I knew that when I arrived. He was just some friend of Steven's over to enjoy the new meat. We fucked, and by the time it was done, as far as I was concerned, I'd always known a bat was in charge of the frat, and there was nothing odd about there being a bat family. I met Henry a few months later, at his Ceremony of Dominance."

He rubbed his temple. "That's where things get... weird, even for us. It was the thirteen of us and Henry. We were in the basement. Where we... initiated you, Thomas, but Hubert had written one hell of a phrase around the altar. I recreated what I remember, but I didn't see all of it. I was... busy."

"Henry fucked each of us, as usual, with Hubert last. You know how that last fuck of the ceremony goes. It's balls to the wall for you and Him. There's nothing but that ass and—"

"Gilbert," Gavin said. "We have all gone through it, and going into too many details now might lead to unnecessary distractions." He motioned around at the erection. No one was reaching for them, but Thomas was eying Madoc's, wondering if he could suck it and still pay attention to what Gilbert said.

"Right, sorry. As Henry climaxed, Hubert bit down on his neck."

Thomas looked up, the memory of Henry biting his neck fresh.

"At that point, my memory said he'd explained everything. How biting was a thing in his family, being bats and all that, and that blood wasn't a thing we even thought about." He became quiet for a few seconds. "In seconds, Hubert went from a healthy, virile man to a literal husk of one. We freaked out. Balls, did we freak out. But Henry started giving instruction and while it didn't make us stop freaking, it got us controlled enough could fuck us. Then, Henry had been the house leader from the moment I'd arrived. There hadn't been a ceremony or a Hubert. Hubert was still his father, but he was off somewhere running Heindrick Industries."

He shuddered and began pacing again. "The two days after that are a mess. He screwed up with my memories of those two days so much that even remembering everything, especially because I remember everything, I can't tell what he actually told me versus what's a memory of that day he planted there. I tried counting the number of different memories I have of those two days and gave up when I hit thirty. If I had to guess, he switched things around on an hourly basis. He'd tell me something, then it would be a bunch of memories, then sex again and he'd tell me something else, and it would repeat. Or he made me remember the sex and what he told me and the rest is actually what happened. Honestly, if Donal hadn't confirmed those were all memories, I'd have decided Henry had put some kind of memory bomb in my head to drive me insane on the off chance I saw through what he did."

"Wait," Gavin said, raised his hand, and Gilbert stopped pacing. "Donal saw what you remembered?"

"He did for me too, Grandpa," Laurence said.

"Same here," Thomas added, remembering the state his memory had left the two of them in.

“He and Grant talked before and after,” Gilbert said. “They think it has something to do with Donal having to somehow go and ‘get’ what’s lost. I didn’t get half of what they said. But it makes Donal a sort of ‘outside observer’ and it gives a ‘view’ of the change as they happen in my memory. The way he said they spill out of Henry when he came into me. And while I couldn’t tell you which memories in those two days are mine or his, Donal confirmed that the times Henry told me his story are my actual memories. The rest’s him fucking with me.”

Gavin nodded and motioned for the armadillo to continue.

“Heindrick isn’t a surname. He is Heindrick Stoker. Henry is Heindrick, as was Hubert before him, Hector before that, and any other one. The phrase he wrote around the altar lets him dump his memory and power into his son. He’s been doing it since back in the early nineteen hundreds.”

He looked at Thomas. “You’re going to need the short Wiki for you to get anything else, so here goes. The Stoker, yes, of the Bram Stoker, was a family of bats who abused the drinking of blood. Bram did what he could to avoid it, but the addiction was deep in his bloodline. Dracula’s a cautionary tale, or maybe a way to ease his guilt, no way to know. He died not long after sonless... or so we believed. The O’Boland elder convinced him to sire one. He promised to keep him away from any Stokers and that they would wean him off the blood. That way, his family didn’t have to be erased. After a few generations without touching blood, they would be able to return to the Society.”

“Are you sure it’s the O’Boland?” Gavin asked, frowning. “I know Sean. He’s never given an indication they had anything to do with the Stoker, other than the part they played in handing them over to the Church.”

“He probably doesn’t know. I’ll get to that,” Gilbert replied. “Heindrick is the grandson of that boy. His father and grandfather were, by Heindrick’s own accounts, upstanding men who would have made the Society proud. The tone was far from respectful when he said that. He had his Ceremony of Dominance, got his power, that of absorbing and injecting memories through cum. He couldn’t do all that much, a recent event. The alterations were flawless though, if he had the time to compose them before reinjecting them. It was enough the O’Boland made use of him. Oh, there was no craving for blood at that point.

“His first taste of blood was accidental. He scraped the skin while fucking, barely got a drop of it. It was enough to be assaulted by memories. They were clear and the bump in energy from the blood made processing them simple. And it was enough to awaken his addiction, so he kept going. By the time he was caught, he’d worked out that the shorter the time between him ingesting a memory and injecting it back, the stronger and further back it could reach.

“They might have caught him, but they couldn’t keep him. In his escape, he ensured no one could follow him by removing any memory one of them could have of him. That’s why Sean O’Boland never mentioned the Stoker boy. None of them remember there being one.”

Gilbert tapped his phone. “I had Colby get some of our sifters looking into Heindrick’s father and grandfather. Henry didn’t say what he did with them, but he mentioned when he got on the boat that took him to America. They found two bats, clearly father and son, delivered to a hospital, with no memories. Utterly wiped.”

Thomas shuddered along with Gilbert. Remembered the glee with which Raphael had talked of wiping Thomas’s mind and making him someone else.

“Once in America, Heindrick drifted for a while before landing in Minneapolis, taking Sigma Theta Gamma as his personal palace.” Gilbert let out a slow breath.

“Is that everything you remember?” Gavin asked.

“It’s the ground shaking stuff. After that’s mainly him grooming the frat members into his little royal court, turning them into his playthings, or a parody of who they were when they arrived.” He opened his hand and a golf ball size sphere of light appeared over his palm. “Using me as an example. He noticed how I used my power felt different when he experienced the memory from other firestarters’ memory he’d sampled, so he pushed me to train until I figured out this is what my power was. And as soon as I did, he took the memory away, leaving failure after failure and him comforting me each time. Every so often, he’d let me remember, and then he explained that he did it in part because he was worried that if you knew how powerful I was, you’d recall me, but that ultimately, it was more because it was fun to watch me feel impotent compared to my more powerful frat brother, and watch the misery when I relearned what he’d done to me, right before taking it away again.”

Gilbert frowned. “You know, having said that, and remembering those memories he covered, I’m realizing something. He’s a damned possessive bastard. He had Benjamin fail one year just, so he’d keep him around. He had Charley go for a second major for the same reason. I think that’s why he’s using the Richard for protection, instead of pulling an easy disappearing act.”

“You maybe right,” Gavin said, “on both counts, especially how easy it would be for him to disappear. He can make anyone who catches up to him forget did they.” He sighed. “Raphael is going to send him running when he goes in there, guns blazing. Or worse, he’s actually going to catch him and gain the clout to demand you be handed back to him.”

“As well as borrow a mind wiper,” Olavo added. “Doesn’t this mean we should hurry to go in before he does?”

“We?” Gavin asked with a chuckle. “I hope you aren’t including the lot of you in there.” He raised a hand and Thomas closed his mouth. “I know you want to rescue your family, Thomas. I even understand it. But you have no training with your power. My understanding is that saving Owen left you someone winded. That isn’t something that can be risked in the middle of a battle. I swear I’m not going to let Raphael make a mess of this. And he isn’t in a position to be jump on the next flight to Minneapolis and drop a squadron of men there. As of the last conversation I had with Byrnwood, there is nothing wrong happening in his city. I know it isn’t true, because we have captured men Henry send to bring you back and Donal had them remember what his happening.”

“Raphael had Ettore,” Thomas said. “That’s how he knows Henry controls the Richards.”

Gavin nodded. “But the word of one man, even that of an elder, isn’t going to outweigh that of an entire family agreeing on what is happening. I’ve had anyone who’s had contact with Richard reach out and get a sense of how Minneapolis is faring. They all saw one form of ‘it’s business as usual’ or another. So we have time. I promise that when the time comes, you’ll all be appraised of how things are progressing, or if you want, Thomas. I’ll see to it you are in the command center so you can watch what is happening.”

“But I can help,” Thomas insisted. “Base on what we’ve worked out of how my power works, my bedroom in my parents’ house has to be a spot I can land at. And at the frat, there’s—”

“Thomas,” Gavin cut him up in a ‘this isn’t up for discussion’ tone, “Olavo explained how your power works. I will not authorize an operation that involves going in blind, and results in your being unconscious, therefore leaving the team going in without a way to extract if things go bad. I will not be someone who deprives your father of his son simply because it might simplify things. Am I clear?”

Thomas closed his mouth and swallowed the lump that formed in his throat. Then he nodded.

Chapter 51

Alvin, TX, March 29th

Thomas wandered the house, fighting the sense of futility that was creeping up.

He'd been informed that any and all attempts to convince Byrnwood Richard to come to Houston had failed. From Gavin asked for a meeting between elders, to acquaintances of the Richard elder inviting him over for a break from the stress of running a family. Gavin had even contacted a common friend out of Alaska to make an offer, since it was possible Henry had instructed Byrnwood to refuse any offer coming from Texas.

It was now clear the orders was to refuse all invitations, period.

He'd been given access to the information the men Donal had restored had provided, as part of Gavin promising Thomas would be kept in the loop, but Thomas didn't want to be informed, he want to go out there and rescue his family.

He'd been surprised at how good rescuing Madoc had ended up feeling, despite the complications and how reluctant the rescuee was. Even Recuing Grant had ended up feeling good, in spite of getting stabbed in the side.

So what if in one case the man they'd been running away from had found them, or if in the other Grant ended having to rescue Thomas and sacrificed his staff to do it. It had felt good to be out there working toward saving them, instead of roaming in a house a thousand miles away from where the action would take place.

He walked by an open door, stopped and stepped back to look in. It was a small library, bookcases filled with physical books, two plush chairs, and a dark wood coffee table. Felix sat before it, hand on a cloth, tracing the same path on the varnished wood, his face blank.

Owen had a lot of solid wood furniture in his house, from a rocking chair that looked to have been made from recovered tree branches, a bench from what had to be lumber from and old barn, and every table and chair in the house was cared for hardwood.

Well, Owen said it was cared for. Felix had had opinions on the quality of that care. The bench and rocking chair he left alone, but the tables, he had polished with a passion Thomas had rarely seen outside of Felix angry fucking him.

And now, here he was, running his hand over a hardwood table with the passion of an inmate on the hundredth hour of the same meaningless task, for not apparent reasons.

Sure, it might not be apparent, but there was a reason. Donal had finally had time to start on the rest of his frat brother's memories, and Felix had insisted he be among the first ones. Thomas's hadn't had much time to just sit with the implication of the alteration. Stuff had hit the fan and he'd been too busy.

And it had only been one memory. After all the work with the margays and rats, Donal was comfortable retrieving months' worth of memories in one sitting. Thomas figured that once the others had had all their memories retrieved, he'd finish his session, it wasn't like he'd have a lot of them altered. And then he'd have the time to sit and deal with adjusting to whatever Henry had changed about his life.

"You okay?" Thomas asked from the doorway. He hoped he wouldn't be alone when he went through that, so he could be there for his brother, even if it was Felix and the snark he would send at him for intruding.

Instead, he got a glance, a shrug, and the otter was back looking at the table.

That was so out of character Thomas wasn't sure what to do. "So..." immediately, he trailed off. "Let me guess," he tried again, "you're morose because Henry hid that you were your Elder's son, so you didn't get to lord that over us."

"I wish," Felix replied without looking up.

Thomas had been certain that would get a reaction. Or at least some counter about how the otter didn't need to be an elder's son to lord how much better then the rat he was.

"This probably sounds as weird to you than it does to me, considering our history, but do you want to talk about whatever you've learned that's bothering you?"

The shake of the head stopped halfway. "We're better."

That was more like it. "I know. I think that was the first thing you told me when I joined the frat. How I'd never be as good as you." He sat in the other seat.

"No me," Felix replied, "us. The Chouteaus. We grow up being told how much better we are than the rest. Our city is orderly. Problems are dealt with quickly and efficiently. Each one of us, to a man, should be proud of our name. All of us." He fell silent. "All of them." Another pause. "But not me."

"Felix?" Thomas asked after a full minute of silence.

The otter snorted and threw the cloth on the table. "I'm not an elders son," he said disdainfully. "I'm whatever the opposite of that fucking is. Useless is what they're always calling me. Useless man, from a useless family, with a useless power. Like I went to Him and begged for the power to go on other's dreams. Like this was my choice and I'd made a fucking bad one."

Felix grabbed the cloth again. "Did you know I've had more sex in the last year and a half than I've had in all the years before? Do you have any idea how ridiculous that is? I, born into the Society, can count on two hands the number of time I've had sex with with a family member. I've had more sex outside of my family, than within. And that's all because of Henry. Fucking Henry made me think I was the height of the Chouteau. That I had the confidence to go after what I wanted. To mock what I didn't. He made me everything I should have been. And it's all fake."

"It's can't all—"

"You want to know why I'm UMn, Thomas?" the otter demanded, cutting him off. "You think it's because of how good the curriculum is? The contacts I'd make within the frat? You think that when they sent me here, they even thought about what I could do?" He gave a mocking snort. "I'm here, because my family tried to screw the Richards and got caught. I'm here because when the Richard demanded my elder send one of his to Minneapolis as a guarantee against them ever trying something like that again, my elder asked for the Chouteau that was expendable. The one no one would miss if the Richard got rid of him. Everyone pointed to me. Don't bother asking. No one was kind enough to tell me what they did that deserved me being sent as a hostage."

Felix chuckled. "But that's not even the worse of it. Oh no. Henry took one look at this pitiful excuse for a man and shook his head. He told me, the bastard fucking told me that if I was going to be a joke of a Chouteau, he might as well make me into one that though he was a real son of the family. Then he made me forget that. Who I'd been. He made me someone real. Fuck, you want to know what the real joke is?"

Thomas stays silent. He hadn't expected this level of changes, or how Felix's family had treated him.

"The real joke is that he never sent that Felix back home. As him, I could have stood there and mock them back, when they threw insults at me. Instead, I cowed. And bastard that Henry is. He didn't just switch me back. He made me remember who I was going to be. He made me beg him not to do it. Plead, fuck, I even offered to be his alone once. If only he'd let me be that version of him as I saw my family again. Then, that me would no longer exist. I'd be meek Felix. Waste of space Felix. He gave me the most ordinary memories of my time at the frat. Not that anyone ever asked about my time here. Or about anything concerning me."

Felix chuckled. "The really funny thing, when it come to you an me, is that I think you would have like that me. You care so much that one look at him, and you'd have been his best friend, and I would have loved you for it. I, Felix Chouteau, the most despised Chouteau by the other Chouteaus would have been best friend with the first ever teleporter." This time his chuckle was mocking. "But because Henry had to have his fun, you hate my guts. When my family finds out I didn't suck you cock and rim your ass so they'd have a chance as controlling you, they're going to rip my balls out. I didn't think badly of you at the party. You were a great cock sucker, and I though I'd like to fuck that ass of yours, but I didn't really give you a second thought, really. Sorry. When Lim Suggested you join I didn't care. I mean, it didn't sit well that we'd bring an outsider in, but I remember how you sucked me off, so I figured you'd be good for some fun."

"Thanks, I think?"

"Henry is who figured there should be one among us who'd see the outsider as lower than dirt. He wanted his drama and I was the lucky winner." He slouched back in the chair. "Once this is over, watch them pull me right out, and sell me to some friend of the elder as a housemaid or something. All because Henry had to have his entertainment."

"Is that something they do?" Thomas asked, stunned.

Felix shrugged.

"Look on the bright side. Whoever that is, they're going to be rich, so they'll have hardwood furniture for you to—" Thomas winced. "Or is that something else Henry gave you?"

The otter shook his head. "That's something he let me keep throughout pretty much every version of me he turned me into. He barely altered the memory either. Just to accommodate who he wanted me to think I was. We were visiting a relative, me, my dad and my brother. We weren't invited directly, it was just one of those large thing where everyone was expected to attend, so we did. Five minutes after arriving, we were bored,

so we snuck out and explored the mansion. We'd never been in a mansion before. Our house is the definition of lower middle class. Anyway. Me and him. Me nineteen, him eighteen two full blooded Society men without supervision. You can imagine it wasn't long before we were fucking. The room wasn't a bedroom, but it's not like we need a bed. The table there looked solid, so we were on it, going at it hard with one of my cousins showed up. It was his house we were in, and he was with a few other relatives. With anyone else, they'd have joined in. With us, he was screaming at us about having sex on his grandfather's favorite table. My brother's reaction was to say it was my idea. Dad just handed me over to punished as they saw fit."

He went back to polishing the table's surface, but he put energy in it this time. "I got lucky, in a way. I've heard stories where chastity belts are brought in as part of the punishment. All I did was spend the summer polishing and repairing hardwood furniture."

"And it didn't leave a bad taste? Being forced to do that for a whole summer?"

Felix glanced at Thomas, and the smile was genuine. "I discovered that while my life couldn't be fixed, there were something that could. It didn't matter how scratched a table is, with diligence, patience, and hard work, it can be made beautiful again, so it became something I latched on to pull me through anytime something in my life broke that I couldn't do anything about."

"You can do something about this," Thomas said, and Felix snorted. "I'm serious, Felix. Your life doesn't have to go back to what it was. If the way you remember your memories is like me, they all feel just as real, so why not pick the set that make you the guy you want to be and call those real." Thomas chuckled. "You never know, with the right combination, we could end up being—"

A door slammed. "Don't fucking tell me to calm down!" Madoc yelled.

Thomas was in the doorway before he realized it, saw Limbani pass on his way to the other rat and grabbed him, shoving him into the room and at Felix.

"I'll make it up to you," he yelled as he rat after the rat. He passed the opening door and Donal look out, worried. Fuck. He'd lost track of whose turn it was. He caught up to Madoc as the rat slammed another door shut, and grabbed it, nearly getting his hand caught in the jam.

"What else did Henry take from you?" Thomas asked before Madoc could yell at him for intruding. He wasn't letting his friend deal with this alone.

"The fucker took Pryce's mother away!" Madoc put his phone to his ear.

"Henry made you forget about her?" Thomas was confident Madoc had mentioned her during Thanksgiving, but since he'd forgotten about Pryce this time there was no—

"Raphael took her!" He looked at the screen and typed something.

Thomas tried to get his brain to shift gear. This was about what Henry had done. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he doesn't give a fuck about us!" Madoc typed again, growing agitated. "She's my best friend. Who else was I going to have a son with? Not one of those strangers he'd assigned to me." He glared at the phone. "But she's not answering my call or my messages." His face brightened, then darkened again. "Fuck. Her parents have no idea where she is." He typed again. "The plan was for her to move to Minneapolis. Once she was there, we'd figure something out to get Pryce out from Raphael's grasp." He caught himself before throwing the phone. "Henry made me forget about her like he did Pryce, but Raphael made her vanish!"

"Why would he do something like that?" Thomas asked, then raised his hand at the responding glare. "Not a Lewiston. You remember that now, right? I don't actually know your family history."

Madoc took a breath and placed his phone back on the bedside table. "Before Raphael, our families were the same as everyone else's. My mom lived with us. She and dad had separate bedroom because she's normal, and dad could fuck guys late into the night. I sort of remember them talking about slowing down and making more time, but I was nine and she died not long after that, so who knows what it was about. I was that for my son and Jennie wants it too."

He dropped on the bed. "Raphael doesn't give a fuck about families. He only cares about one, his, the Lewistons. He wants all the sons to look up to him and only him." He looked up at Thomas. "If not for all the old timers who survived to argue with him, the kids would be living in some sort of indoctrination center, being turned into good little Raphael's boys. There's been talk of someone replacing him, but nothing done about it as far as I know. I doubt Raphael took that lying down. Once enough of them die off, I expect that center's going to be a real thing."

"So all those women being kept around?" Thomas asked, recalling what his aunt had mentioned when they'd spoken.

"That was suppose to be a short term thing, ensure we had a generation with a lot of guys born, but the kids were supposed to be given to fathers to be raised in family units, but not everyone could, so the crèche

was setup. Only Raphael kept the surrogate around, and they're kind of becoming the norm. A few generations and it's going to be the only way boys are born in my family and they'll all do whatever Raphael tells them to."

Possibly not even that long, Thomas thought. That mind wipers Raphael wanted to get was to make him and Victor pliable, but what was to stop him from doing the same to anyone within his family that didn't agree with him?

Thomas swallowed as he realized how much worse things could get. If Raphael realized Henry could not only make his opposition forget, but turn them into his allies, would he make a deal with the bat, instead of capturing him and handing him over for political power? And if given a chance, would Henry turn things around and make Raphael loyal to him?

Thomas fought against screaming, or running off to tell everyone they had to go to Minneapolis right now. He was just a student without much experience of the kind of conflicts that was happening around him. Owen or Gavin or someone else making decisions had to have thought about this already.

Fuck Thomas needed something to do that wasn't sitting around thinking nightmare scenario. He eyes the other rat's naked body. The way Madoc was shaking in anger made the thought of sex less appealing right now.

"How about we lift some weights?" Thomas asked. "I'm sure Owen won't mind if we use the machines here and it's a better outlet for your anger than lying there thinking of all the things you want to do to Raphael." He paused when the other rat didn't immediately agree. "And I need something to distract me." No reaction. "Once we're done, they have a sauna."

That got Madoc on his feet and moving.

* * * * *

Thomas and Madoc stepped out of the bathroom, done with their post sauna-sex shower and sex, only to moving out of the way of a mumbling Yating who looked at his phone instead of where he was walking.

"Remember, remember," the panda said under his breath. "You have to remember, too."

"What's up with—" Madoc started.

"Yahui!" Yating yelled as he put his phone to his ear. Thomas wasn't even sure he'd heard it ring. "Thank His balls you remembered too." The rest was said in Mandarin.

"I thought Yahui was his missing brother," Thomas said

Madoc shrugged. "I guess he isn't missing anymore?"

"Thomas," Grant called from the open door to the office Donal was working out from. Inside, the Squirrel was stretched on the couch, hand over his eyes.

"What's with Yating?" Thomas asked, and Donal groaned.

"Tell me we're done," the squirrel said. "After that, I feel like anymore and I'm going to go to that apothecary you talked about."

"Apotheosis," Grant said. "You still need to do Thomas."

"I'm fine," Thomas said as Donal sighed and forced himself to sit.

"Are you sure?" Grant asked. "You only unlocked one memory."

"Yeah, but how vital will anything else be? I can wait until Donal's rested. What happened?"

"Twins are even weirder than the rest of you," Donal said, closing his eyes and leaning back.

"We aren't weird," Madoc said, and the squirrel snorted.

"Do you want an aspirin or something?" Thomas asked.

Madoc snorted. "Olavo's cock will be better."

"Aspirin," Donal said. "I've had enough cocks for a while."

"How can you say that?" Madoc asked, sounding offended.

"I'm normal."

Grant chuckled before turning and motioning for Thomas to stay.

"Fine," Donal said, "I'm not powered by sex, like you. After the flight from Montana, I am good for at least a few more days."

"That makes you the weird one," Madoc stated.

Donal shifted only enough he could fix one eye on the rat. "So it's normal for one of them to get his power when the other's initiated?"

"That's not how it works," Madoc said. "You have to be initiated to be granted your power."

"Well, After Yating got back their room after his initiation, Yahui surprised him by walking through the bed."

"That's got to be something Henry did," Thomas said when the squirrel didn't add anything. "Changed

his memory to think that—”

Donal shook his head, then groaned again. “Henry had a bitch of a time changing their memories independently. When he did manage it, it took a lot out of him. As soon as we were done, he grabbed his phone, mumbling for Yahui to remember.”

“He just got a call from him,” Thomas said.

“I’m glad. And if you’re really okay with doing this later, Thomas, please turn the lights out as you two leave.”

Grant returned with the aspirin and water as Thomas closed the door, then he went looking for the panda. He found him in the living room, his mother on the phone, speaking Mandarin. Thomas had no idea what was being said, but she sounded happy.

“Is he okay?” Thomas asked.

Yating nodded, smiling. “Other than the mind fuckery, Henry’s treating him well. He has him looking after Horst in a secret part of the frat.”

“Who’s that?” Madoc asked.

“You haven’t met him?” Yating asked back. The rat shook his head. “Horst is Henry’s son. Yahui is basically his nanny.”

“Henry has a son?” Thomas asked. “Why would he... right, the transferring his mind thing.” He paused and looked at the Panda. “If Yahui takes care of him, doesn’t that mean we can—”

“Grab the bat by the balls,” Samuel said, “and squeeze them real right.”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking,” Thomas protested as the badger put his phone to his ear, grinning.

“Get a team ready,” Samuel said, “we now have leverage and we’re going to be pulling on it as hard as we can.”

Chapter 52

Minneapolis, MN, March 31th

Thomas wanted for thing to be moving already. He was getting fed up with being crammed into the small stairwell. With him were Donal, a few steps below, with the door to the rest of the start at his back, Limbani, grinding against Thomas's ass and Vincent by the door, hand on the handle and patiently waiting for the go order.

The initial plan had been for the larger force to storm the elder's office and stun everyone there and take the Byrnwood to a location where Donal could free him, but one of the margay with his memory restored, maybe Vincent, Thomas hadn't exactly paid attention to that part of the planning, had pointed out that Byrnwood's personal security wore interference vest, and that the moment they thought their elder was in real danger, the alarm would be sounded and the entire building would be flooded by security forced armed with guns loaded with bullets. So the plan had been turned into a surgical one, centered around Thomas, and the rat had jumped at the chance to be part of something, instead of being stuck just watching.

Thomas's group had traveled in one of the three black vans that had been waiting for them when they landed, and driven to an office building in the center of St-Paul. From the parking lot, they'd made their way too many flights of stairs for Thomas to keep track until they had crammed themselves into this small section of it.

Other than Gilbert and Laurence, there were no armadillos on any of the teams. Samuel had the teams in place even before everyone had had their memories restored. Gavin hadn't been happy when he found out, but the private call between elders had resulted in the armadillo allowing Samuel to run things. The cousins had come because they had insisted they be there to help their frat brothers, and Samuel didn't mind.

The badger had reassured Thomas that while he was helping with the Richard elder, Samuel would see to his family's rescue personally. Which Thomas had taken to mean he'd be expected to pay for it at some point down the line. Samuel hadn't stopped grinning while Thomas considered putting his foot down about everyone treating him like a commodity they could buy for the cheap price of helping him, but how much of an afterthought would his family be, if even that, without Thomas dangling there to make everyone salivate. He wrapped himself with the idea his family would be safe to keep the sense he was whoring himself out from overwhelming him.

When Thomas felt the trail Limbani was grinding become wet was when he decided he'd had enough. He was in the process of turning, intent on ripping the jeans off the monkey and forcing him to shove that cock up his ass when Vincent opened the door and freezing air replaced the warmth their bodies had built up.

"Go," the margay whispered, stepping out, and Thomas's horniness was sufficiently frozen he followed the man as the crouch-stepped to the ledge. On the other side of the road stood another office building, four stories shorter, the top floor of which was home to Richard Management.

Thomas took out the binoculars and searched the windows for the elder. Samuel had showed him pictures after pictures until Thomas could see the elder's markings in his sleep. Byrnwood Richard loved looking over his city, Vincent had explained, so on top of his corner office, he had insisted his secured quarters have large windows. So Thomas scanned from window to window, looking for him.

"Second window," Vincent said, "east from the corner."

As Thomas looked at where indicated, Limbani grabbed the rat's crotch, and Thomas was staring at the grinning monkey.

"Grab—" Vincent said, glancing at them. "Doesn't he need direct contact?"

"Don't give him—"

Limbani already had his freezing hand in Thomas's pants.

"I am so fucking you when this is over," the rat threatened through chattering teeth.

"Don't worry, you won't have to wait that long," the monkey said, and was stroking his hardening cock.

Thomas grabbed Vincent's gloved hand as Donal put a hand on his arm, before putting the binoculars to his eyes and focusing on this office.

"On my signal," Vincent said.

If Samuel was wrong, Thomas thought, that was another one he was fucking right after this.

* * * * *

“Stop worrying,” the badger said, dropping in the jet’s seat opposite Thomas, cleaning cum off his fur with a finger. “It’s going to work. Look,” he added, before Thomas could voice his doubt. “Your exhaustion levels only depend on three factors. I know that because, while you’re not remembering thing all that clearly, due to how those teleports left you, the memories are there for me to see. You teleport blind, and you need to be revived. It doesn’t matter if you’re alone or you brought three others with you. You drop and you have to be fucked back. There’s the line of sight. If you’re alone, you barely feel anything unless you chain like two dozen of them. No, you didn’t do that, I’m extrapolating. If you bring someone with you, you’re winded, like you ran hard for a minute or two. So this is all that’s going to be. And with the monkey insisting he go with you, if it turns out I’m wrong, he’s there to fuck you back. Tell you what, if he has to do that, you’re welcome to fuck me in return.” The badger pushed himself to the edge of the seat. “Of course you can fuck me now, too.”

* * * * *

Thomas dropped to his knees on appearing in the room, then was on all fours as chaos erupted around him. This was far more than being out of breath, but he wasn’t unconscious, so there might be an argument there for Samuel being right. Not that Thomas planned on telling him. Not that he’d had to, he realized as his pants would pulled down. The guy was a mind reader after all.

The pull of Vincent’s power tipped Thomas on his side as Limbani pushed his cock in. The Margay’s vacuum power was perfect for keeping opponents off balance, literally. The beanbag shotgun sounded once, as the monkey fucked Thomas. Heat watched over them, then cold. The shotgun sounded again, then quiet.

“I have the door,” Vincent called as Limbani came loudly and Thomas felt his breath come easier. “Do your thing and hurry, this only works if Mister Richard calls off the security, because they are already on their way up to this floor, and there’s no way I can even slow them down.”

Thomas was flipped to his back as Donal hurried away, presumably to restore Byrnwood’s memories and the rat’s legs went over the monkey’s shoulder. It was interesting how different elders required to be treated differently. Gavin came across more as a grandfather than someone in charge, even Raphael seemed okay with an informal ‘sir’ for all that he made it clear he was the boss. And here, the Richard elder seemed to need to be referred to as Mister Richard. Was there one out there who—

Thomas grunted as Limbani pushed back in hard, then was fucking him.

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” Thomas said, between grunts.

“Are you kidding,” Limbani replied, grinning. “Why do you think I had to be here? Fucking in the middle of a firefight’s always been a fantasy of mine.”

Why was he even surprised? Thomas wondered.

The monkey came, and Thomas looked around. Donal had the elder in the chair behind the desk. The margay was still. Vincent was at the door, holding a phone in his muzzle while reloading the shotgun. Nothing was happening, so Thomas pushed Limbani on his back and fucked him.

“Told you you wouldn’t have to wait,” the monkey said.

“Why is it taking so long?” Vincent said, the phone now to his ear. “Their halfway here.”

“I’m going as fast as I can,” the squirrel replied through gritted teeth. “Henry went deeper than I thought he would for this.”

Thomas put them out of his mind and pounded the monkey. Limbani wrapped his legs around the rat’s waist and used them to encourage him to go harder, so Thomas obliged.

Thomas barely heard Donal yell he was done through his orgasm.

“Sir,” Vincent said, as Thomas caught his breath. “Elder. I’m Vincent. You have to tell security to stand down.”

“What?” The older margay exclaimed. “No, you’re attacking just as Henry said you.... What is going on? Why do I think that bat’s a lover of...” the tone turned glacial. “Where is he?”

“He’s being handled,” Vincent said. “Sir, security’s two floor down, when they breach, they are coming in hot. Please have them stand down.”

The elder frowned at Vincent. “Weren’t you...” he tapped his phone and spoke in it. “Jason, this is Byrnwood. I’m fine, you can stand down.” He listened, rolled his eyes and borderline snarled. “No, that stupid code phrase of yours is that I’m find and Dandy, now I just told you to stand the fuck down. Of course you can come check in on me, just don’t shoot anyone.” The elder put his phone away.

“Now. Someone tell me who your are and why I have two kids fucking on my office floor.”

Thomas figured that was as good as a 'don't you day start again' order and pulled out of the monkey.

"The only thing you need to know for the moment is that the Mercier are running the operation and that we need you to play along with Henry at least until we enough of your personal security has been freed from Henry they can ensure you're safe from anyone else he might control."

Byrnwood stood and planted his hand on the desk. "I am your elder. I need to know a fuck more than sit here and let those badger handle things."

Vincent swallowed and took a step back. "I'm sorry sir. That's Donal, he's who restored your memories. That's Thomas, he's transportation. The Adesida was only here for... well, I guess he turned out to be power."

"You know," Thomas said as he grabbed his pants. "Being referred to as a car isn't doing much of my self esteem." Vincent's phone buzzed and Thomas waited for the news.

"The house is cleared," the margay read. "Everyone present has been contained. No injuries on either side."

"Yes!" Thomas pulled the monkey to his feet.

"Where do you think you're going?" Elder Richard demanded.

"I'm going home," Thomas replied with a grin, and willed him and Limbani there.

* * * * *

"Come on," Limbani whined as Thomas rolled to the edge of the bad. "Just one more. I'm seeing that you're going to need it pretty soon."

"I'm fine." Thomas pulled his jeans on. "And I can tell you're just saying that so you can fuck me again. You'll get your chances, I'm sure you can see that. It's going to be a long while before I head anyone."

"Fine." The monkey pouted. "Then send in Madoc so I don't get bored while waiting for you to come to your sense."

"How about Felix instead?" Thomas asked, buttoning up his shirt. "I think he could used the distraction."

"Fine," Limbani said as if it was the biggest imposition ever made on him. "Send them both in."

Thomas stilled and looked at the hopeful monkey over his shoulder. Again, why was he even surprised? "I'll send in which ever one loses the draw." He left the room and headed down the stairs.

"No," Olavo's exasperated voice came from the kitchen. "That isn't how this works, Shila. I need your —"

Thomas stepped into the kitchen to the capybara rubbing his muzzle. "I'm well aware of what my father agreed to, but—" His expression darkened and he strangled the air with his free hand. "What?" his ears folded back as he looked around. "No, I didn't—" He said one of his Spanish curse as his gaze landed on the fridge. "Fine," he admitted, "you're exasperating. Happy? Then how about you tell me how the chaos? What is Henry doing?"

Thomas turned around. Food could definitely wait until that was over. In the living room, Thomas found Felix with his feet on the formica coffee table, watching something on his phone.

"If you're bored, Limbani needs to be fucked."

"Oh?" the otter asked, glancing up. "Are you saying you, Mister MaximumHertz, can't keep up with our monkey?"

Thomas narrowed his eyes at Felix. "Didn't you say something to the effect you through we could have been friend if not for what Henry did to you? That's not looking all that good."

The otter grinned. "Come on. Admit it. Me being insufferable is what made you like me so much."

"It's what made me like you so little. That ass of yours made me like you a little more." The rat grinned back.

"So I deal with mister insatiable, and we call it even?"

Thomas rolled his eyes. "You manage to sate him and then we call it even."

"Ouch, come on, I never did anything to deserve an eternity with the monkey."

"Just go before he decides to come out and hunt someone down. This isn't the frat, the sex is staying confined to that room." Felix swatted Thomas's ass as he headed to the stairs.

"Do you know who in my family was home?" he asked the bear standing guard by the door. Samuel's teams were composed of badgers and bears, something about two families making out the bulk of the security forces. He was one of a handful of the men Samuel had left at the house in case Henry sent someone to retrieve Thomas's family for leverage.

"Your mother," the bear answered, his French accent thick. "And your brother. They have been locked into their rooms."

Thomas hurried up the stairs, pausing only to close his bedroom door on the otter fucking the monkey, not that it did anything to keep Limbani's vocal enjoyment contained to the room. Then he was on the third floor, and before the door to his parent's bedroom. He stared at the crystal door knobs, momentarily thrown but it's presence.

When Samuel had asked Thomas's opinion on how they could restrained his family with the least amount of injuries. The rat had offhandedly replied that all they'd need were knobs on the doors that locked, since no one in his family had ever experienced them.

He hadn't expected to be taken literally. And certainly not for the plain aluminum knobs to be replaced with clearly expensive crystal ones on every bedroom except Thomas's.

He knocked lightly. "Mom?"

"Thomas?" his mother's voice came through the door. "Is that you? You're him?" she sounded so happy to hear his voice Thomas reached for the knob. "Henry did it. He brought you home."

He froze. He'd hoped, prayed, that Henry wouldn't have bothered with his mother, since she was a woman, but he'd changed her memories too, and she thought he was the best thing under the sun.

He forced his jaw to loosen. He'd be wasting his time trying to convince her Henry wasn't the good guy here. And that wasn't why he wanted to speak with her. "Mom. I know this is probably the worse time to tell you this, but Victor's been kidnapped. Orinda too, but she escaped. The—" he closed his mouth. He had no idea if the twins were safe. "Raphael has—" no, he couldn't tell her that either. What Raphael was putting his brother through was too horrible to burden her with it, at least while he still had no idea how Victor would be rescued. Gavin had promised he'd work on that, but Thomas was losing faith in diplomacy.

"Tell Henry," Nadia said confidently. "Tell him what's happening and he'll fix it just like he fix you being taken from us. You'll see, he'll bring the rest of our family home."

"Sure," Thomas replied bitterly.

He wished Donal had come here with him so he could restore his mother's memories, but it was more important for the Richards to be freed. She was home and safe. That had to be enough for the moment.

"Where's dad?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"At work, of course," she replied. "You know your father, if he isn't home, he's at the university."

"And Judith?"

Nadia laughed "who knows where your sister's gone to now. She's probably with that boy she likes so much."

Maybe Judith had been out this whole time and Henry hadn't gotten his hands on her. His mother would be able to tell him more about that guy, but it wouldn't help. Thomas had never had any interest in the guys his sister dated, well, except for Yating.

Who he cross path with on his way to his second stop. The red panda didn't even acknowledge him, his attention focused on the toddler bat in his arms. He turned to call after him, only to be stopped by the sight of Yating in the guest bedroom fucking another rat.

No, not another rat, that was Thomas the panda was fucking.

Even having been there when Firmin had taken his shape at the start of the mission, Thomas was still thrown for a loop. Then the pieces fell in to place. Two panda meant the other was Yahui, the bat in his arm was Horst. Yating wasn't fucking Thomas's double for the fun of it, but because Firmin suffered the same limitation as Thomas when he used his copied power. This had been a blind teleport, so the badger, currently rat, was near death from exhaustion.

That meant part one was basically done. Was that the chaos Olavo had been needing an update on? Maybe he should go help out Yating, then, Thomas could fuck Firmin, fuck himself, get himself to fuck—

That way lied insanity he decided and moved on to his next stop.

He stopped before his brother's door, with the same expensive door knob on it. He knocked. He knocked again when there was no answer. A third time, more forcefully. Fuck. Had Roland jumped out the window? No, Samuel had instructed the guards to always have eyes on them because he didn't want anyone in Thomas's family to pull what the badger as referred to as a 'Hertz escape', then smirked at Thomas glared at him.

He opened his mouth to call to his brother, reassure him it wasn't some enemy, but closed his mouth. He had no idea what Henry had done to Roland, on top of raping him. From listening to his friends describe the memories the bat had given them, it was clear Henry had a vicious streak, making people suffer silently. What if, as far as Roland remembered, Thomas had been the one to force sex on him?

Maybe it was best if he left his brother alone until Donal restored his memories. That ways he'd—

Was a coward. Funk, was he going to run away from this and leave his brother to suffer? No, he wasn't

going to be that kind of brother. He was going to be there for Roland.

With a shaking hand he unlocked the door and pushed it open, stepping in. He didn't see his brother and stepped further in.

"Roland?" he called, just before something hit the side of his head and he was seeing stars.

Chapter 53

Minneapolis, MN, March 31th

Before he hit the floor, Thomas was grabbed. “Thomas?”

Thomas regained his footing. “Roland?” He touched the side of his head and his fingers came away dry. “What the fuck?”

“I thought you were one of those goons!” Roland threw the little league trophy in the hamper behind him, and gave a bashful shrug when Thomas tilted an ear, then his arms were around his brother. “I knew you’d make it back. I told Henry you were too tough to need any kind of rescue.” He looked at Thomas. “How did you get by them? How are we escaping?”

Thomas couldn’t form words. What had Henry done to his brother that Roland had not only defended him, but was hugging him now, was happy to see him. Yes, Thomas expected his brother to be pleased to see him, but he also expected it to come with a large dose of him being pissed off at how what Thomas had done had affected his schooling.

“L..” Thomas tried, and faltered. Okay, this was still his brother, and Thomas had to say something.

“You guys okay?” Madoc asked, stepping into the room, and Roland stepped between him and Thomas. “Sorry, I heard a commotion and with the door open, I thought Rol might have escaped.”

“My name’s Roland,” the younger rat replied, offended. “And I was going to, but Thomas’ here to rescue me. Madoc,” he frowned. “You’re one of the guys who kidnapped him.”

“Is that what Henry told you?” Thomas asked. As he tried to step around Roland, his brother moved so he’d remain between them.

“It wasn’t Henry. One of the cops who’s been investigating told us that the people who kidnapped you are from the Lewiston family, and that’s Madoc Lewiston.” He glared at the rat in the doorway. “Grandma was right. The Lewistons are nothing but trouble.”

“Hey, I had nothing to do with his kidnapping,” Madoc exclaimed, raising his hands placatingly. “I helped him escape.”

“A lot more than that’s wrong,” Thomas added. “Henry changed your memories. Once Donal gets here, he’ll make sure everything goes back to the way they were.”

“Things aren’t going back to—”

“I don’t want to hear about it,” Thomas said, cutting off Madoc.

The other rat sighed. “Thomas, you have to look at how things are. Roland went through two of the ceremonies.”

“No, he—”

Roland snorted. “Like that’s news. I had my second ceremony like two years ago.” He grinned at Thomas. “Remember how you were waiting for me once Dad was done and we—”

“Stop!” Thomas stepped away from both rats, bile rising. “That isn’t real. And don’t you say one thing,” he told Madoc. “My brother isn’t part of this.”

“Thomas,” Madoc said, “this isn’t something you can wish away. He, as in our god, claimed Roland. That’s not something that can be undone.”

“No,” Thomas replied. “It’s just Henry screwing with everyone’s memories.”

“Laurence said—”

“I don’t want to hear about it!”

“Thomas, what’s wrong?” Roland stepped forward and placed a hand on his arm. “Look, whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.” He smiled and squeezed.

Thomas bolted for the door, shoving Roland aside. He couldn’t deal with this. He needed air. “Out of my way,” he told Madoc when the other rat didn’t move out of the doorway. Somewhere miles behind him, Roland called his name, and Thomas did everything he could to ignore the pain in his brother’s voice.

“Not until you apologize to your brother,” Madoc replied sternly.

“That isn’t my brother!”

“Thomas, it’s me. I’m your brother.”

“I remember him,” Madoc stated. “But this is who your brother is now. No, shut up.” Thomas’ muzzle

audibly snapped shut. “Do you really want Roland to remember how you’re treating him right now? Because you know that what Donal does doesn’t remove anything. Are you going to run away from a brother who adored you, just because of your memory of one who acts like he can’t stand you?”

Thomas closed his eyes as he felt Roland behind him. The heat of his body, the hand on his back, the shiver that ran down Thomas’s spine at that tender touch. Didn’t Madoc get it? Thomas needed Roland to hate his guts. How else was he supposed to keep his own feelings under control otherwise?

“Thomas?” Roland asked quietly, his voice breaking on the word.

He turned, and the hurt and love in his brother’s eyes nearly made Thomas run. If Madoc through he could stop me, he was forgetting all Thomas needed was to glance over his shoulder to be in the hallway. But as much as he wanted Roland to hate his guts, Thomas didn’t want to hurt his brother.

“I’m sorry,” Thomas said, trying to keep his breath from shuddering. “It’s been a few rough days. That’s all.” Roland’s expression became pure joy. Then he was hugging Thomas. He stiffened, then forced himself to relax, paying not to get a hardon. He hugged his brother. “How are you, Roland? How were things after I left?”

“They were rough for a few days,” Roland replied, his voice muffled by Thomas’s shirt, “but then Coach Agrid got the team together and they rallied around me.” He looked up and grinned. “You know how the team is. Neil’s been over almost every night since and—”

Thomas stiffened again as the implications hit hard. “Oh, fuck.”

“What?” Madoc and Roland asked. Only sounded worried, the other curious.

“Henry got to the football team,” He told Madoc.

“Henry’s never met the team,” Roland said, puzzled.

Thomas used the opening this gave him. “Roland, I have to go deal with something. I need you to stay in your room until I get back, okay?” When his brother nodded, Thomas left the room, followed by Madoc.

“What do you mean?” the other rat asked, as Thomas pulled Madoc away from the door before allowing himself to slump against the wall. He kept his voice low and prayed it would be enough to keep Roland from hearing them, in spite of the utter lack of sound insulation in the house.

“The team Roland referred to, that’s—”

“His high school football team, I figured. I was at their match with your family, remember?”

Thomas nodded. “They way he said they rallied around him, I’m pretty sure he means that *all...*”

“And the only way the entire team has sex with your brother is if Henry changed all their memories, too.” Madoc let out a slow breath. “I’ve got to give it to the man; he is thorough.”

“He’s a fucking rapist,” Thomas snarled, then glanced at his brother’s door and lowered his voice again. “Look what he did to my brother.”

Madoc fixed Thomas with narrowed eyes. “You’ve got to stop this, Thomas.”

“And what the fuck does that mean?” He replied angrily. “Henry is who—”

“Stop shoving your brother in the closet because you don’t know how to deal with having the hots for him.”

“What?” Thomas asked, barely keeping his voice from breaking in fear. “I’d never—”

Madoc rolled his eyes. “I’m not blind, and you aren’t as subtle as you think.”

Thomas swallowed. Who else knew? “What you think I feel doesn’t matter. Roland’s straight. He always—”

“Never was.”

“He is straight,” Thomas insisted.

“I met your brother before all this happened, remember? At Thanksgiving and at the after game celebration. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“You’re just fantasizing.”

Madoc smirked, then forced it away. “I saw that look in his eyes when he thought no one was watching. He was looking at you and he wanted you, and he felt guilty about it. Fuck, it’s just about the same look you get anything you look at him and think we can’t see. It’s in how you react that you’re different. You look away. He clamps down and scowls.”

“Let me guess, you want me to go in there and—” Thomas closed his mouth. For all he knew, his brother was at the door, listening.

“Of course not. What I’m saying is that what you feel isn’t wrong. Your brother’s hot, you’d have to be straight not to react. Just like you and your dad are hot.”

“My dad?” Thomas said, the start of his protest at how hot he might be blown away by the fact Madoc thought his dad was hot.

“Don’t worry,” the other rat said with a smirk. “I know your uncles have dibs. And if he says no after, I’m dropping it. I’m not like Raphael. I remember sex is sacred to Him, and that consent is needed from both sides.”

“Right, you expect me to believe Raphael raping me for days after days did nothing for him?”

“It’s sex,” Madoc replied flatly, “And Raphael’s an asshole, so he had his fun, but without the consent, he got a fraction of the energy he’d get otherwise, but that’s distracting us from the important point. In two years, he’s—”

Someone cleared their throat, and Madoc closed his mouth.

They turned to look at the naked Thomas standing at the top of the stairs, who nodded toward the other end of the hall. Swallowing the dread, Thomas turned.

Roland was looking at them through the partially open door. His wide eyes, fearful expression made him look much younger than his sixteen years. “What do you mean, you were raped?”

Thomas’s mouth moved, but nothing came out. How the fuck was he supposed to—

He hit the wall, then Madoc kissed him. “That’s to get your brains working again,” the rat said, expression and tone serious. “My family caused it, so I’ll explain it to him.” He pushed the dressed Thomas toward the naked one. “Take a load off in the meantime and enjoy yourself.”

By the time Thomas processed what had happened and turned, his brother’s door was closed and neither rats were in the hallway. He turned to look at Firmin wearing his body and was about to look away when something caught his attention.

He stepped up to his double, trying to work out what was off. Firmin stood still, the puzzled expression looking odd as Thomas walked around him. Okay, it was indeed him. Muscled thighs, arms and back, firm ass, defined pecs and abs, all courtesy of Madoc’s training and supplements. Even the cock, now hard, was his, and yet...

“You did something to my body, right?” Thomas asked. “You can make subtle alterations, right?”

His double shook his head. “What you see is what you have.”

“No, I don’t look anywhere that good.”

Firmin snorted. “Trust me, you can believe what you see. You were too busy sucking cock to see the guys drooling and lining up. You have no idea the number of guys I did as you.”

“You what?”

Firmin motioned to the body he was doubling. “Hey, look at this and tell me you wouldn’t... right. You didn’t put yourself out there, so I took advantage of it.”

Thomas tried to decide how angry he should be, as a few on campus encounters made more sense with this new information.

“Felix was pissed when he realized that way more guys were at the mid-semester party for you than him.”

“Because of you,” Thomas said.

“I probably didn’t hurt, but no. Once Madoc started beefing you up, you were pulling them in on your own.”

“You don’t realize what that’s going to do to my reputation, do you?”

His double raised an eyebrow. “You mean the one about how great in bed you are? We have fucked, you know. I know how good you are. No one’s going to think you aren’t living up to the example I set.” He smirked.

Thomas shook his head and chuckled. Yeah, he had to admit that it was in line with what the Firmin he remembered from his time at the frat would do, if he’d been able to copy people. How many times had he caused trouble just imitating their voices? Firmin had always been the happy-go-lucky kind who didn’t bother with the consequences of his action, well, until Donal had made him remember...

“Wait a minute,” Thomas said. “Last time I saw you, you looked like you wanted to die. And now you’re all full of life again.”

Firmin shrugged. “Felix, of all people, pointed out that I don’t have to let my real memories define me. I know what it’s like to enjoy my power on top of being so shamed into never doing anything with it.” He raised a hand and Thomas closed his mouth. “There’s a sordid history of people like me justifying their behavior. And considering some ways Henry made use of me, I actually understand why my family treated me the way they did. But now, I get to decide how I feel and how I live. Fuck, I get to be one of two teleporters in the world. How much more awesome than that can it get?”

Thomas sighed. “You’re going to make me regret agreeing to letting you copy my body, aren’t you?”

Firmin pressed against Thomas, and whispered into his ear. “I will honor this body as if it was our god.”

I will see to it that it is treated with pleasure and orgasms.” He let out a slow breath, and the shiver that cause ran down Thoma’s spine, down his ass and into his cock. “And I will give you the best spot in my bed if you ever want to find out what it’s like to fuck you.”

Thomas opened his mouth to say... he had no idea what he was about to say. Yes? No? Do me now?

The commotion in the living room chased all that out of his head once Judith spoke.

“Let go of me,” she said, in that tone that Thomas had seen quarterbacks run away from. “If you don’t, I swear on His balls that my boyfriend is going to rip yours out.”

“She does mean His balls,” a man answered smugly as Thomas raced down the stairs. “And yes, one word from her and yours are gone, Dumier.”

Chapter 54

Minneapolis, MN, March 31th

“Judith!” Thomas exclaimed as he reached the floor. His sister was in the doorway with a rat in a suit next to her and a bear in body armor with his hand moving away before her.

“Thomas!” She took a step to bypass the bear, whose hand moved back to grab her. The rat with her struck the arm away, then under the arm, kicked the knee out from under the bear and had him down on the floor, held in place with a knee at his back. It happened so fast that all Thomas was left with was the sheer precision of the motions. Then he realized the rat was Trevor, but he couldn’t recall anyone saying what his power was. Definitely something combat related.

Judith looked at Trevor, smiling. “Thanks, Hun.” She kissed him hard enough Thomas looked away.

“His balls?” Trevor asked, panting once she broke the kiss.

“Let me hug my brother first, then I’ll figure out what to do with him.” Then she had her arms around Thomas in a bone crushing embrace. “All might Cum, Thomas,” she exclaimed. “What is going on? First you’re kidnapped and Henry sends people to find you, and now here you are and there’s an army in and around the house. Trevor almost refused to let me come home. Who are these people?”

“Well...” Thomas trailed off. How was he supposed to explain Henry taking over the city and then being here to bring him down?

“We’re Thomas’s personal bodyguard,” Samuel said, stepping into the living room and zipping himself up. “As you know, he’s a teleporter, which makes him valuable. We’re here to make sure nothing happens to him, again. Oh, settle down, she knows already. Henry had to make her believe something to explain why he was going to the one to save you. As far as she’s concerned, she’s watched you blink all over this house, among other things she’s caught you doing.” The badger smiled. “Now, I would love to know where the bat got that memory from. I’m Samuel, you’re his sister, and you’re Trevor Lewiston. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. No, Thomas, we haven’t met before.”

Trevor groaned.

“Why, yes, I am a mind reader. And no, I—”

“Stop!” Thomas yelled. “For God’s sake, Samuel, shut up!” He nearly closed his mouth as what he’d just done registered, then decided to plow right on ahead. “Do you get off on pissing people off? From this point forward, I don’t want to hear one word from you unless it’s to answer a question.”

“Wow, Thomas,” Judith beamed. “That time on your own has done wonders for your balls.”

“I am fucking serious, Samuel,” Thomas said, ignoring his sister’s... praise? As the badger opened his mouth. “I’m going to dump on in San Francisco Bay.” Samuel closed his mouth and Thomas turn to Trevor. “You, let go of... him. Sorry, I don’t remember your name.”

“Dumier,” the bear grumbled, “Francois Dumier.”

“Let go of Francois,” Thomas repeated.

Trevor glanced at Judith, who nodded, then moved.

“Okay, what kind of super power combat thing was that?” Thomas asked Trevor, unable to keep the awe out of his voice.

“Just martial art,” Samuel answered before Trevor could. “Trevor’s power is learning, and he has learned a lot. You asked a question,” he added as Thomas looked at him.

“Question that are asked of you directly,” Thomas stated. “Or I’m dropping you in the bay. Don’t test me.”

Samuel closed his mouth again.

“I love this new take-charge you,” Judith said, and he rounded on her.

“Where the fuck were you?” he demanded. “You weren’t in class, where you were supposed to be.”

She grinned mischievously. “Trev took me out so I could enjoy... him.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow and prayed that Henry hadn’t done something to increase the world infamous Royer over sharing Judith had already inherited from their mother. “You do know he’s a Lewiston, right?”

“Oh, balls yes,” she replied, looking like she was about to swoon.

“What’s with the swearing?” Thomas asked suspiciously.

“Trev’s been teaching me all the Society swears,” she said, smiling. “So I can show him how respectful of his beliefs I am.”

“I didn’t know you were bi,” he told Trevor.

“I’m not,” the rat replied, looking at Judith lovingly. “I’m as gay as it gets, with the most amazing Judith Hertz bias. I didn’t know a woman like her could exist. Strong, independent, who loves fucking me as much as watching me fuck guys.”

Thomas stared at his sister. Was voyeurism something Henry had given her? It had to be. With how much she over shared, he’d have known if that was something she was into.

“You are going to love having him fuck you,” she said, grinning.

“Excuse me?” Thomas asked in disbelief.

“He’s Society, just like you, so—”

“I’m not—” Thomas cut her off, only to be cut off by Samuel forcefully clearing his throat. Thomas nearly told him to mind his business, but the badger nodded to his sister and Trevor insistently as the thought formed, and Thomas finally understood. Until Donal had restored their memories, it was best to play along with their belief.

“I’m not sure me having sex with your... boyfriend—” he couldn’t believe Judith had called a guy her boyfriend “—is a good idea.”

“Thomas,” Samuel said, “if I can interject.”

“Please,” he replied, hoping for anything to wipe that knowing grin off his sister’s face.

“Both of you are aware that Thomas was kidnapped, then you have to understand that we can’t let him wander off, and the until we’ve ascertained that neither of you have been compromised, it’s best of he isn’t alone with either of you.”

“You offering to join in, Mercier?” Trevor asked, grinning.

Samuel looked the rat over. “While that is tempting, no. What I’m saying is that you aren’t having sex with him. You are aware of all the ways you can be a danger to him and not know it.”

“Look here,” Judith started in their mother’s patented ‘you will not be dictating things under my roof,’ tone.

“It’s okay, Dear,” Trevor said, taking her hand. “They’re only looking out for him.” He nuzzled her. “I’ll keep you happy until they’re comfortable letting you properly introduce me to your brother.” He looked Thomas up and down with an appreciative smile.

“Francois, escort them to her room,” Samuel instructed.

“Sir,” the bear replied, not moving. “I think it would be better if someone else—”

“Oh, stop worrying,” Judith said. “I’m not going to have Trev rip your balls out, just drain them thoroughly.” The bear looked at her suspiciously for a second, then was leading them up the stairs.

“Oh,” Thomas called after them loud enough everyone on the second floor could hear. “If you see another one of me, do not hit on him.” He was please not to be able to make out his sister’s question.

“Before you ask,” Samuel said as Thomas was opening his mouth. “That isn’t Henry’s doing. He altered her memories, so she grew up surrounded by Society ways, but she and Trevor met by accident, and the relationship’s all theirs.”

“Oh great, like I need a Lewiston reporting to Raphael once this is all over.”

“Trevor isn’t someone you need to worry about on that account,” Samuel said, “but we—”

“Have a couple of problems,” Shila interrupted from the television. Thomas looked in her direction and her face was replaced by a collie and badger walking along with a golden tiger.

“That’s Jacques and Hubert,” Thomas said. “How come you didn’t have anyone watching my best friend?”

“It gets worse,” Shila said before Samuel could answer. This time, Thomas watched as Chima and his father walked along Greek Row. The angle showed Sigma Theta Gamma in the distance ahead of them.

Cursing in French, Samuel walked away, phone to his ear.

“I can make sure the tiger doesn’t get to the frat,” Shila said. “I can have the three of them in police custody in under five minutes.”

“No. I’m not having my best friend arrested.”

“Don’t worry, once this is over, I’ll have all the charges erased.”

“No, he’s still going to know he was arrested. And,” Thomas added, remembering a detail. “All it’ll take to get them out is Kuno calling the station. His dad’s friend with the chief of police.”

"I can complicate things for them long enough your friend's going to be kept out of this."

"Which is going to reveal our involvement," Samuel said, putting his phone away. "Which Henry still isn't aware of. The men I have on your father just lost track of him. Which isn't the disaster it would have been if your friend had taken them out to get to your father."

"You do know I can manipulate information, right?" Shila said snidely. "No one will realize it's anything more than—"

"No," Samuel said. "There are too many factors for even you to be certain of. Such as," in continued as she opened her mouth. "What memories did Henry give Hubert and Jacques before sending them to get Paul? One is strong enough to life a car, the other is indestructible. Your friends know all that. So if they believe getting Paul to the frat is more important than anything, they could do a lot of damage, not to mention raise questions we don't want asked."

"I can—" she started.

"I will not endanger the families here, or our faction, simply on your belief you are better than anyone out there," Samuel stated. "In twenty-four at most, Byrnwood will have control of enough of his family for us to proceed."

The hand was on Thomas's phone before he'd consciously realized he was taking it out.

"Don't," Samuel said.

"He has my father, Samuel," Thomas said, the thoughts that had driven his subconscious slamming into his conscious mind. "You're asking me to let Henry do whatever he wants to him in that time. You know what he's capable of. You've seen the other's minds, the mess he made of their lives."

Samuel pushed Thomas's hand down. "I know you think that handing yourself over to that bat will save your father and your friend, but that's what Henry's counting on. You have to know he isn't going to respect whatever he tells you. He thinks you took his son. That he's reacting by going after your father so directly means he's desperate, which is what we wanted to happen."

He took Thomas's head in both hands. "I know it's hard, Thomas. But this is the only course that gets Henry taken down. I promise you that whatever Henry does to your father will be undone. Fuck that," he said vehemently. "This had nothing to do with your power and my family's desire to have you on their side. This is about me telling you that when this is over, you will have your father back. Not a broken version of him. But him. I'll even make sure you don't know what was done to him, if that's what you need. I'm a mind reader, Thomas. I know who to talk to to get things done."

Thomas nodded, forcing the pain down. The badger was right. He couldn't play Henry's game, no matter how much it hurt. "Twenty-four hours, Samuel." He was done playing anyone else's game. "If this isn't underway by then, I'm dealing with it myself and the rest of you can go fuck themselves. Is that clear?"

And the badger smiled. "Kid, we're going to win this after all."

Chapter 55

Minneapolis, MN, April 2nd

“Are you ready?” the badger asked. They were in the living room, since Thomas’s bedroom was too small for ten of them, plus Samuel.

Thomas hoped no one pulled the draped open and let the outside world see his naked ass. “Sure,” he said hesitantly. “So long as I can actually pull this off.” Those holding on to him were Gilbert and Laurence, Yating and Yahui, Firmin, still his double, also naked, along with the four Richards who’d returned from Houston with them. Them, Samuel had made sure were dressed and equipped for the infiltration.

“I told you before, Thomas. Numbers—”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Thomas cut the badger off. Wasn’t he a mind reader? “It’s targeting the showers. I know I’ve been fucked there nearly as much in my bedroom, but I barely have a sense of memory of the place, and it isn’t like I had a chance to test it, for obvious reason.”

“Then aim for your bedroom,” Yating said. “You already got the two of us there.”

“I’d very much prefer you aim for the showers,” Samuel said. “The larger space is to their advantage if—but so long as you’re in the frat, I’m sure they’ll be able to adapt.”

“Oh, now you read my mind,” Thomas said, giving him the glare Samuel thought he’d avoided. He closed his eyes and remembered the humidity, the sound of the water, the press of the bodies, the cock in him, the mouth over—

“Got you,” Firmin said as he caught Thomas and supported his weight.

Thomas opened his eyes in time to see the others move. The margays moved surprisingly fluidly, covered in body armor. They took point, and his frat brothers followed.

Then he felt the world twist around him. Unlike when he teleported, it wasn’t seamless. He knew that he’d been there, and that now he was—falling again, and bouncing on a mattress.

“I have Thomas,” Grant said, turning him on his stomach.

“Me too,” Felix replied.

“You have Firmin,” the kangaroo said. “He needs Society sex for the extra boost so he won’t revert.” Then he lay on top of Thomas.

“We should get Trevor in here,” Felix said. “He really wants some of this ass.”

“I am not having sex with my sister’s boyfriend,” Thomas said, then moaned as Grant pushed in.

“I’ll do it for you,” Firmin replied, then he too was groaning.

* * * * *

Thomas appeared on the rooftop, stunner hunting rifle in hand. “I’m in position,” he said, zipping up the jacket. The wind had picked up, and the temperature dropped.

“In position,” his voice echoed in his ear. Firmin voicing he was where he’d been directed too. Thomas wondered if having the two of them with the same voice was as confusing to anyone else.

“Thomas, you’re first,” Shila said. “On my signal, your target is the rooftop opposite the road from the frat house.”

“Got it.” This was his starting point because the elevation gave him sight of every other frat’s roofs around Sigma Theta Gamma.

“Once there, take potshots at them. Don’t bother aiming. That’s not your job. Just get noticed, so one of them tells Henry. Same to you Firmin,” she said severely. “You two kids aren’t here to heroically turn the tide. You’re the distraction Henry’s got to focus on so he won’t remember that fleeing is always an option.”

“I know,” Thomas hissed. He’d argued hard enough to be involved more directly, but as soon as he and Firmin were back in his bedroom, the attack force that had been waiting outside received the signal to start their assault. No matter how hard or fast he was fucked. It was impossible for him to be functional in time to take part in that.

So, he and Firmin were going to be the bait. They were the rat who stole Henry’s son.

“Go,” Shila said.

Thomas stood, and with the next heartbeat, he was on the rooftop, looking down at the street. He swallowed as the idea of people battling out smashed into the reality of it. The front of the frat had ice

barricades men in body armor used as cover as they fired at the attacking force, who used the vehicles they'd arrived in to same purpose.

Thomas fired at a couple of the defenders and blinked away, ducking down in the process.

"Firmin, go."

He had no idea if he'd been seen, but the goal wasn't for anyone to see him this time, or even the next or however.

"Thomas, go."

He stood located a rooftop with line of sight on the firefight and he was there, adding a few shots and blinking and ducking.

The goal was to be seen eventually, but in such a way they had no choice but to work out he was moving through teleportation. That was the only way someone would tell Henry. Anything else and the men outside would simply deal with it themselves.

His time came again, shooting and leaving.

Three more times, and Thomas wondered if anyone was making the connection. Henry had to have told them to—motion out of a window as Thomas lined up his shot. The bat was there, looking, no, glaring at him. Thomas smiled. In all the month he'd lived at the frat, he hadn't seen Henry angry, not really. Even Judith barging into the house had left the bat more offended than angry.

Now, Henry was royally pissed.

"He's seen me," he said, as the bat stepped away from the window. He went back to picking a target. Before he fired, there was a commotion on the defender side, then they were picking themselves up and reforming the ranks. Thomas wasn't sure, but he thought he'd seen—

A door behind him slammed open, and Thomas turned. An angry hyena stood before the stairwell's door.

With a strangled scream, Thomas teleported himself in the distance, visible over the top of the stairwell just as Chima became a blur.

Shila cursed as Thomas teleported to a roof before he gained any downward velocity. "Firmin, Decoy and run! The fucking hyena's outside. What the fuck is he doing here? Samuel, what happened to him being on the other side of the city?"

Thomas raised his head enough to look over the parapet.

"He's a speedster," the badger replied. "You have any idea how impossible it is to keep track of those? How come you didn't know he was in the frat?"

As Thomas searched, Firmin appeared on a roof, fired in Chima's direction, then disappeared. In the next blink of an eye, the hyena was standing on that rooftop and Thomas ducked down again.

"I can't see where there are no cameras," Shila snapped. "And that fucking building barely had any, and what I see out of the phones or the screens isn't helping us any."

"We like our privacy," Olavo said.

"Can we focus?" Thomas asked, looking at the sky before peeking over and locking eyes with Chima. "Fuck." The hyena had vanished already. Thomas picked a roof and dropped into icy cold water. He got himself out of it as fast as he could and cursing. "What do we do now? You guys said we couldn't have him involved because of how fast he is, and I believe you. I think he'd faster than I teleport." He wanted to look up and see where Chima was, but he was terrified of being seen.

"He isn't," Olavo said calmly. "For one thing, unlike you, he has to open doors. So just make sure you jump to roof where the doors to the stairs are closed and you'll give yourself the time to teleport away."

"And how do I know which of the building bothered closing the door to the roof?" Thomas demanded.

"Just don't land on a roof you've already been on then," Olavo said.

"That's—"

"Guys!" Firmin yelled in the comm. "Help!"

Thomas stood. Firmin was barely keeping ahead of the hyena, the two appearing over the same set of buildings, but with Chima getting closer and closer to getting his hands on Thomas's double.

"Teleport as far as you can see," Thomas instructed. "Then teleport again before you start falling." He put the rifle to his shoulder and lined up his shot. He cracked up the stunner as high as it went. Hunting stunner couldn't kill, but sometimes, they needed one hell of his charge to bring down a buck.

"That's taking us out of the prepared battlefield," Shila complained.

"Deal with it," Thomas snarled as Firmin vanished and Chima stood still, searching. He fired just as

the hyena turned in his direction.

“Fine,” the pangolin snapped as Thomas teleported. “Samuel, you deal with the fighting. I have to get into all the fucking cameras in the city if I want a chance to keep these two idiots alive.”

“Just make sure they keep the speedster away from the battle,” Samuel replied. “If Henry changes his mind and brings him to fight directly—”

“I know,” Shila snapped. “That was why we timed it with him away. Okay, Firmin, I have eyes on you.”

The door behind Thomas slammed open, and Thomas was on another rooftop.

“Firmin, while Thomas has the hyena busy, get your ass back up.”

“You seem to think you know how this works,” Firmin replied. “So why don’t you come here and make it happen?”

“You good?” Thomas asked, appearing on another roof with the impression of a door slamming open behind him.

“How the fuck do you do that? Appearing in the air with nothing under you?”

“Desperation,” Thomas said as the door burst open. “Which is where I’m at now!” He teleported.

“I’m up,” Firmin said. “Where am I going?”

“Look east,” Shila said as Thomas appeared on the next rooftop. “Next teleport you do, Thomas, drop. Firmin’s taking over. Remember, don’t land on a building you’ve already been.”

Maybe you should come here and do it then, Thomas thought before disappearing from the roof and dropping as soon as he appeared on the next one. Cursing as his knee landed another puddle of ice cold water.

* * * * *

Thomas appeared on the roof and did a quick scan as he dropped for his next landing spot. The landscape had changed so much in the last... hour? Was it more? When he his rifle’s charge emptied? That he had no idea where he was in the city, let alone in relation to the frat. Shila hadn’t bitched in a while, so he figured they’d stayed far enough.

He was down to throwing the rooftop gravel at the hyena to get his attention, or dirty snow, when a roof had a spot where the shadows had kept the snow from melting. Just like this roof. He packed a few in preparation for having to give Firmin an opening.

“Fuck-fuck-fuck,” came in something that wasn’t quite Thomas’s voice.

“Firmin, what’s happening?”

“I’m tapped dry,” his double said, sounding more like Thomas this time. “I’m having trouble keeping your shape.”

“The house,” Shila ordered. “Get your ass there now!”

Thomas stood, located the hyena, and threw the snowball.

“He’s there and they’re fucking him. How long can you keep this up?”

“Who fucking cares how long I can do this?” Thomas said as he appeared on another rooftop. “It’s not like it’s looking like *he’s* running out of steam. How long can he fucking run like that?” No one answered. “Look, we have to subdue him. That’s the only way this ends.”

“I’m open to ideas,” Shila replied. “Jump.”

Thomas was on another rooftop, nearly slipping on an icing puddle as he looked for his next destination.

“I’m only useful for killing their phone and—jump—monitoring you and the speedster. Jump,” he said again just as Thomas appeared on the roof.

He teleported again. “How’s Donal? Is he up to restoring Chima’s memories? And can we get him somewhere I can lure Chima to?” He grabbed handful of roof gravel.

“You’re forgetting you’re on the other side of the river,” she said as Thomas turned to the roof he’d just been on.

“That’s not the problem you think it is when I can...” he trailed off as the hyena didn’t appear on that roof. “Where’s Chima?”

“He’s right... where the fuck is he?”

Thomas ignored the panic in her voice and scanned around. The most likely situation was that Chima had misjudged and ended up on a different building, so all he had to do was wait and—

“There aren’t any cameras in your building?” Shila exclaimed.

By the time Thomas understood what she meant by that, Thomas heard the creaking of a door being opened. He couldn’t afford to turn to see if it was Chima. He teleported to the roof he was looking at, then was staring at an open door.

“Fuck.” He turned to find a roof, only for his foot to slip out from under him. Stars exploded as his head hit the ground, but he pushed through the pain and dizziness. He was on a knee, the cold water helping clear his mind, when he saw the blur, then darkness filled his vision, and the smell of sweaty hyena filled his nose.

“Finally,” Chima whispered. Holding Thomas’s head against his chest with a hand. “Why did you leave, Thomas?” he asked, his voice pained. “You’re family. We’re the only family you have. You can’t imagine how much Sigma Theta Gamma suffered before you left us. I know,” he cooed. “It wasn’t your fault. They took you. But it’s okay now. I have you. I’ll bring you back home, and Henry will fix everything.”

When the stars exploded again, they were followed by darkness.

Chapter 56

Thomas's mind was filled with molasses, each through had to wade through and fight not to be pulled back down. He knew he was conscious by the pain at his ankle, distant as it was. That, he somehow knew, was a bad thing, so he willed his eyes open, and a decade later, light trickled in. Shifting his head might have been another decade, but finally he saw down the length of his naked body to the band of leather around his left ankle, and the dried blood that had pooled along the lower edge. Lines and curves were etched on the leather, and he knew he'd seen them before, but they were buried deep in the molasses.

The molasses won and his head fell back. It only took three years for it to hit the hard surface, but even at that slow of a speed, stars lit up his vision on impact. No bed should be this hard. This felt like stone.

When his vision cleared, he'd managed to keep his eyes open, and he was looking at the unfinished ceiling of a room he knew. In fact, he'd looked at that exact ceiling many months ago, just before he'd joined that frat.

A noise echoed in the distance. Someone hitting the largest cast-iron pot Thomas had ever heard, creating a deep reverberating sound. It brought back the memory of the assault on the Frat. The wall of ice, the people fighting.

Right, that sound couldn't have been good.

He turned his head and became aware of a black stomach as it drifted. He thought it looked familiar, but then he was distracted as the crotch came into view. Cock and balls. Nice package too. The guy wasn't hard, which seemed odd. When had a guy in the frat not been hard? Still, it was close to five inch in length with a good girth, so even if he was a shower, that was going to feel really nice pushing into him. If he was a grower? Then, he was going to have one hell of a time. He forced his gaze up, tried to get his mouth to form words, tell the guy to stop waiting and start fucking. All thoughts of sex froze as the guy looking back at him was his father.

"Welcome back, kiddo," Eric said with a gentle smile. "You had me worried there, but everything's going to be okay now." He ran a hand along the side of Thomas's head. "Whatever they did to you, Henry's going to fix it, and they we're going to be one happy family."

"Dad?" Thomas asked, nearly gasping as the shock brought the world back to normal speed.

"Of Course." His father's smile faltered. "You remember me, right? Please say you remember me. If they took that I—"

"I remember you," Thomas answered. "Why are you here?" *Naked, looking at me with the want no father should be looking at his son with?* He knew what his frat brothers would say about this, but his father had said Henry would fix this, so there was no doubt he'd been mind-fucked. The lust in his father's eyes did not belong to him.

"Where else would I be, but by my son, where I helped make him a man?"

Thomas was going to kill Henry, plain and simple. He was going to strangle the bat with his bare hands for putting those memories in his father's head. That and for Roland remembering Thomas fucking him. He didn't care what anyone else said. Even if Samuel was true to his word, Henry was dead for what he'd done.

He swallowed his anger. "Dad, you have to help me get out of here. Can you take off that thing around my ankle?"

"I'm sorry," Eric said in a saddened tone, his hand moving down. "It's got to stay on for your own protection." His father reached Thomas's biceps, and with a finger, he traced the line demarcating the black fur of his head and upper body to the white below. "You think Henry's the bad guy, but that's just what they have you believing. He's one of your best friend." The finger moved along the line down Thomas's chest. "You were the one who brought him to our—"

"Can we not?" Thomas sharply cut off his father. The idea he remembered the two of them having sex was sickening enough, but if he also remembered that Henry had... Thomas's blood froze. Henry had fucked his father. It had to have happened; it was Henry. Everything was about sex with the bat.

He swallowed as he noticed his father's erection, and it turned out his father was a grower. His father's face was approaching his. The hand moved past Thomas's stomach to—don't go there. Don't think about that. Do not get hard!

The desire in his father's eyes was sickening. If their lips touched, Thomas was going to be sick. He so didn't want to throw up with his father—

“Well, looks like our favorite rat’s awake,” Henry said, and Eric looked at the entrance, moving the lips away from Thomas. With a sigh of relief, Thomas looked too, then was horrified at the sight of Paul, naked, hard, and pressed against the also naked bat. On the other side, the bear still wore body armor, but he had the besotted look of a man in the presence of his favorite lover. Thomas thought that was Francois, the bear that had been at his house before all this started.

If one of the Dumier was in Henry’s thrall, did that mean they’d lost already? The fighting couldn’t be that intense if Henry had had the time to rewrite the bear’s memories.

Eric straightened and stepped aside, moving his hand away from Thomas’s erect cock. There was no shame in his father’s actions, just the respect of someone ceding the space to his superior. To someone with a prior claim to Thomas.

“Hey Thomas,” Paul called to him joyfully. “I’m so glad to have you back. You can’t imagine how I missed you, and missed fucking you,” he added mischievously.

“Francois,” Henry told the bear, “Stay by the door. You, more than anyone, know how desperate our enemies are to take Thomas from us. You’re all that’s keeping us safe.”

“I will not fail you,” the bear answered with adoration, then took position before the door, machine gun held before him.

Henry stepped next to Thomas in the space his father vacated, while Paul stayed a few steps behind.

“Thomas, Thomas, Thomas,” the bat said with a long-suffering sigh. “Do you have any idea of the problems you’ve caused me?”

“I’m not the one going around biting people like his a vampire out of some bad book?”

“Is that supposed to be a dig at my family?” Henry asked, amused. “Unfortunately for you, all I know about them is from that book, and everything is more implied than anything else. Also, you shouldn’t speak of a book you haven read. It’s quite good.” The bat grabbed Thomas’s muzzle hard enough that if he hadn’t had his hand clamped over it, the rat would have cried out in pain. “I should—” he said through clenched teeth, then forced a slow breath in and out. When he released Thomas’s muzzle, it was gently.

“That, hurt,” Thomas snapped.

“I’m sorry. How you left was hurtful. Then you turned my boys against me. But worse, you stab me through the heart by taking my son.” He took a few more breaths, but his tone was hard when he continued. “So you’ll fucking forgive me if I have trouble being as gentle as your father.”

“Henry,” Eric said, an edge to his voice that made Thomas look at his father. “That’s not his fault. They turned him against us. They used him to turn the others, too. Direct your anger at them, not my son.”

“Yes, Of course,” Henry replied with a roll of the eyes and nearly dismissive tone. “But don’t worry. By the time I’m done here, neither of you will remember my anger and what I nearly did.” He looked at Thomas’s still hard cock and smiled nastily. “I can’t wait to see how you react to the memories of your father fucking you. Considering how you feel about that stuff, I’m going to take my time crafting them. Put in far more details than I need to so your mind won’t have to fill the rest with vagueries. Oh, and let’s not forget how you fucked your brother. I can’t wait for his ceremony of dominance and watch him return the favor.”

“You’re fucking sick,” Thomas spat.

“Thomas, language,” Eric chastised.

“Oh come on Dad,” Thomas replied. “He’s talking about me forcing myself on Roland. Don’t tell me to watch my language after that.”

“Force yourself?” Paul said, snickering. “Man, they did a number on you, didn’t they? Roland has to be the most eager bottom I’ve ever known. Makes me wish I knew more Society guys at that stage.”

“Never fear, Paul. I have had little time to come up with scenarios for you, but I promise you, once this is over, I’ll make sure you’ve met many of them growing up.” Henry grinned as Thomas glared at him hatefully. “Of course, your memories will match that too, Thomas, just like all theirs fit together. I can’t have anyone have conflicting memories, can I? Paul remembers everything you, your father and Roland got up to when he visited. Even partook, isn’t that right?” Henry looked at the golden tiger who was stroking himself.

“Oh yeah,” Paul replied, “and I can’t wait until we get Thomas home so me, his dad, and Roland can properly celebrate his return.”

Eric’s confused frown became a lustful expression, and Thomas wished he could know what had caused it. Was Henry so free with what he said it contradicted what his father knew?

“Stop that,” Henry told the tiger. “You don’t have our stamina and you’re going to need it later.” He looked at Thomas again. “And neither does your father. That was baffling. How could a Society man need an hour to get hard again? Of course, there’s nothing in his memories explaining it, since he too would be a foundling. I thought that once he was initiated, his stamina would come roaring back, but no.” He chuckled.

"I'd resigned myself he was defective, and then Francois provided me with the answer. Who would have thought His cum could be carried through your mother's family." He leaned forward. "But now, I think it's time I found out what you've been up to."

"Don't," Thomas said angrily, wishing he could pull away, shove the bat back, but the glare and his voice were all he had the strength for.

"Now, now, Thomas," Henry cooed. "Don't you remember?" he chuckled. "You love this part."

Thomas winced at the bite, and opened his mouth to protest, but there was no a distance between himself and his body. He floated in space, watching events of the last months pass by. He felt Henry suck on his neck, and in response, those events stretched and separated. One set of memories pulled away from him.

Then Thomas slammed back into himself as Henry disengaged.

"Wow," the bat exclaimed, "what was that one? Why was it do vivid? I'm going to need a moment here." He chuckled after a few seconds. "Francois. I need you to remember a squirrel, Donal Hines. I'm going to want to keep that one." When he looked at Thomas again, his expression was pained. "I am so sorry, Thomas." He placed a tender hand against his cheek and Thomas couldn't muster the energy to pull away. "That someone calling himself your elder would treat you like this is shameful. You will get your revenge, Thomas. I promise you that. What I had in mind as your punishment for abandoning me wouldn't even hold a candle to what you've already lived through." The bat moved a finger along Thomas's shoulder, traced something, then the sting of the bite went away.

"You think I was revenge?" Thomas demanded, forcing himself not to look at his father, who was frowning again. He couldn't risk drawing attention to him, because whatever the bat might have done to him, a thinking Eric couldn't work in Henry's favor. "All I want is to rescue Victor and my nephews, and then never think about that bastard again."

"And you think your plan would work?" Henry asked teasingly.

"If there was some justice system to deal with this," Thomas forced himself to continue despite the worry of what Henry might do with what he'd seen. "I'd testify the hell out of him, but you people are beyond justice, aren't you?"

"I can give you justice, Thomas, if that is really what you want."

"I want nothing that you're offering."

Henry smiled. "Then, I won't offer. I'll just make you want it. You're going to see things my way, Thomas. And you're going to be ever so grateful when I let you rescue Victor. But first, let's make sure you're on the same page as everyone here, shall we?" he stepped to Paul. "And that starts by refreshing my memory as to what they remember."

"Leave him alone!" Thomas yelled as Henry bit the tiger's offered neck.

Henry kept looking at Thomas, amused as Paul moaned and leaned into the bat, who ran a finger along the trembling, hard cock.

Thomas wrenched his gaze away from that and found himself looking at his father. The frown went away and the thinking expression became a loving one. Thomas wanted to scream at his father to go back to thinking that he didn't look at his son with that much love. He wasn't that kind of father. Eric was the kind of father who demonstrated how much he loved by always being there, always pushing him to improve. It might drive Thomas insane at time, but that was how he knew his father loved him.

And then the expression became worse as hunger became visible in his father's eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Eric asked, stepping close again.

Thomas groaned in annoyance. Then had an idea. "Like I've been violated. How else do you think I'd feel, Dad?"

"They had no right doing that to you," Eric retorted.

"Not them, him." He tried to bob his head in Henry's direction. "He's the monster here, Dad. The things you remember, they're wrong."

"Are you saying I don't love you and your brother more than life itself? Your mother, Judith and Victor." The frown was there, then it was gone. "You're the most important people in my life."

"I'm not saying that." Think, Dad, come on, think. Henry can't have covered all the possibilities. "You think that's what a good guy does?" Henry was still latched onto Paul's neck.

"He's a bat. It's something they do. You know that." He looked worried. "Are you saying they made you forget such a mundane fact?"

Thomas closed his eyes to keep his anger from showing. Maybe Henry had covered every fucking thing. He's made himself second to Eric's family, which was smart. Eric would never have believed he'd care for someone else before them. Which meant...

“Dad?” Thomas asked, making himself sound pained.

“Yes, son?” Eric responded, immediately concerned.

“That thing around my ankle,” he said, lowering his voice. “It hurts.”

Eric looked at it. The frown was back. Then he shook his head. “It’s there to protect you, son. Once Henry brings you back to yourself, we’ll be able to take it off.”

Thomas wanted to scream. There had to be something he could say to get his father to remove the leather band. Of maybe he could do it himself? It hadn’t looked that thick.

“Dad? Can you sit me up? This stone’s hard on my back.”

His father was quick, but gentle in putting a hand under his back and raising him. Once Thomas was sitting, he put all his strength into lurking his upper body forward and raising his left arm. He fell forward and his hand landed on the leather. He worked at it, ignoring the pain and the blood that poured out as he pulled on it.

“Thomas, stop.” His father grabbed his arm. “You’re hurting yourself.”

The leather was stronger than he expected, than it should be. And he didn’t have the strength to resist his father.

“Let go of me!” He screamed at his father as he pulled the hand away.

“I am not letting you hurt yourself, Thomas.”

“No,” Thomas replied with as much hate as he could muster. “You’re leaving that to the bat, aren’t you?”

Chapter 57

“No,” Eric said, stepping away in surprise. “Thomas, you have to know that isn’t—”

“Fuck you.”

“Thomas,” his father said in his stern ‘you will obey me,’ voice. “I’m your father and you will not talk to me—”

“You’re not my dad! My dad’s this guy who tries so fucking hard to be there for me, to push me in the right direction, but how can he get that right when I have no idea what direction I want my life to take? Don’t you fucking get it? Me and my dad were finally talking. Did he let you remember that? I finally had the guts to tell him how what he was doing made me feel like I had to be as far away from him as I could before this whole mess started and he listened!”

“It’s okay, Thomas,” Eric said calmly. “Once Henry’s done, you’ll remember—”

“You aren’t fucking listening! How the fuck can you claim to be my Dad when all you’re doing is repeating what Henry put in your head? He’s not going to ‘fix me,’ he’s going to turn me into whatever toy he feels he needs this week. If you think that losing the progress I made with my father’s worth whatever version of happy ever after the bat dreams of, then you are fucking sick!”

Eric staggered back in shock and confusion, and then, finally, he seemed to be thinking. Thomas caught his breath so he could keep pushing his father. Force him to look at what was going on. Eric was methodical. Everything had a process that gave a result. Thomas refused to believe Henry had taken that out of his father. All he had to do was get him to look and notice the inconsistencies.

The slow clapping stopped Thomas from launching into another tirade. He turned the glare onto the bat. Paul was leaning against him, arm over his shoulders. There was a symbol drawn in blood on his chest. It looked like the one he’d seen used on Felix after the beanbag had downed him, but that one had been in cum, so the armadillo had traced it on his phone afterward for Thomas’s benefit.

“That was quite the speech,” Henry said, “full of righteous anger and disillusionment. It’s almost a shame I’m the only one who’ll remember it. Might be worth leaving you with that nagging doubt your father’s never as proud of you as he acts. That you don’t actually deserve the love he showers you with.”

“Just get the fuck on with this and erase me. Turn me into some perfect doll that you’ll use like you want.” Thomas couldn’t see his father, so he had no idea if he was back to adoration, but he had to keep Henry focused on him, just in case his father was still working things through. Fuck, he hoped his father was working things through. Thomas wasn’t looking forward to not being himself anymore.

Henry tiskied, as he stepped closer. “You really think that I’m like Raphael? That I lack imagination?” The bat smiled and ran a finger along Thomas’s muzzle. “You will obey me because you want to. We are going to be the best of friends. Our friendship will only be rivaled by yours and Paul, and will go on nearly as long. Once I am done with you, Thomas, and once we’ve all had our turn at recharging you, you will take me to where Francois last saw my son, not because I tell you to. I won’t even have to ask. You will know that it is the right thing, the only thing to do. That is the kind of friendship we will have.”

Thomas started to tell Henry that wasn’t how his power worked, but he caught sight of his father, frowning, deep in thought as the bat tilted Thomas’s head in the process of pressing a finger between his lips.

“What about what I want out of life?” Thomas demanded as the Henry started turning to Eric. “Do you give a fuck about that?” not biting that finger was so fucking hard.

Henry looked at Thomas, stunned, then snorted a laugh. “You really think a liberal arts degree is something you should want? What else are you going to get the way you’ve been living this life of yours? What is that going to get you in this economy? A position as manager of some burger joint? Thomas, don’t you see that me telling you what you want is better for you? That wanted to do what I want, take me anywhere I want...” The bat shuddered and leaned closer, filling all of Thomas’s vision. “And I get it, all the possibilities ahead of you, all that potential freedom. It’s intoxicating. Maybe more than even blood. That’s why I picked this place to make my hidden palace, as Gilbert called it. All these young people, all that potential for me to play with. And you Thomas. Oh, you have no idea the potential you bring me. I will make you the first of my retinue because of it, and I will see to it that you are eternally happy.”

The bat chuckled. “Well, maybe not eternally. You did betray your prince, after all, and that must have consequences. But I’m not so cruel as to make it last forever. In the end, you, your father and brothers will be happy. You will finally get to fuck Roland and not feel guilty about it.”

Henry's arm moved in a motion Thomas was familiar with, even if it had been months since he'd really needed to jerk himself off.

"Do you have any idea how grateful your brother would have been if you'd just given in, snuck into his bedroom, and taken him? How often he jerked off dreaming that was what as happening? That the dildo was you."

"That's what you put in my brother's head, sicko."

Henry laughed as pulled away. "No, those are all his. What I gave him was his fantasy. You did sneak into his bedroom. You did take him in the night. You did show him that the dildo he'd been using was nothing compared to his big brother." The bat glanced at Thomas's crotch. "You're liking that, I see."

Thomas forced himself to glare at the bat, using the lies he was telling, the abuse he'd committed on his brother, for fuel because he couldn't see his father anymore, and he couldn't afford to look around for fear Henry would also look for his father and... Thomas was terrified of what the bat might do then.

Henry pried apart Thomas's muzzle with a finger. Thomas resisted, but he had little strength. "I'll even have you remember doing that. For now, anyway. See, that's the nice thing about what I do. I don't have to make you suffer right now. Anytime I fuck you, anytime you suck me off, maybe that'll be when I decide to alter your memories. Maybe I'll turn those weeks Raphael and his men raped you into years. Make it like it happened just yesterday, and I'll be the only arms you seek comfort in." He moaned and slowed his stroking. "And the best part is that once you've swallowed this load, you won't know to fear it happening. Each and every time I decide you're due for some punishment, it's going to catch you utterly by surprise, and that, Thomas, is going to feel so fucking good. To see that fear in your eyes as I let you realize it isn't the first time, and that it won't be the last."

Henry put the head of his cock in Thomas's mouth, leaving the finger there as Thomas tried to bite down. "Maybe I'll also take your family from you at times, Thomas. How would that feel, to know you lost everything because you betrayed me?" The smile became even nastier. "Now, get ready to swallow and—"

The bat jerks sideways in time to a loud thwack. Then he fell to the floor, revealing a panting rat holding a broken, slightly bloodied mask. One of the antlers was missing, as well as one of the long incisor. The mask Thomas had last seen when he'd put it on Chima before fucking him like it was the end of the world, or the start of it.

"Do not threaten my son," Eric snarled at the unconscious bat.

"Way to go Dad!"

"What did you do?" Paul asked, worriedly.

Eric spun and brandished the half of the mask as if it was a knife. "He was going to hurt Thomas." Paul stepped back, raising his hands at the anger in the voice. "I don't care what I remember. How much Henry said he loved my son." He pointed to the bat. "That, right there, was how much he hates him. And I will not let a man like that touch my son." He turned to the bear. "If you even think of trying to—"

"We're good," the bear said hesitatingly. "I'm not sure enough of things to do anything right now."

"Thank you," Thomas said, having no idea who exactly he was thanking, and not caring. Maybe the god that was supposed to watch over him and the guys in the frat had done just that, or Thomas's half-assed plan had worked and his father had thought his way back to a semblance of himself.

"Err, aren't we going to need that to get out of here?" Thomas asked as Francois place the machine gun down and stepped away from it as if it was a grenade.

"I don't know what else he did to me," the bear said. "If he put some memory in there to trigger if you try to escape, it's too dangerous. I was hoping you'd teleport us out instead of going through that." He needed to the closed door and the distant gunfire.

"Okay," Thomas said, now the one to hesitate. "But you're okay leaving Henry behind?"

"Certainment pas." Francois frowned, seeming surprised at the conviction behind his words. "I love him. But I also know he's a monster." He rubbed between his eyes. "You have someone who can fix this, right? The squirrel?"

"Donal, yeah. He'll help you remember what Henry hid."

Francois cut the leather band off Thomas's ankle, then he used the blood to trace the symbol Thomas had seen on Paul.

"Can we go now?" the bear asked.

Thomas felt better. The pains were gone, but he didn't feel any stronger. "I'm going to have to be fucked a few times before I can teleport us away."

"Of course," Eric said, move to take position between Thomas's legs.

"Not you," Thomas snapped and Eric flinched as if he'd been hit. "Fuck. I'm sorry Dad. I didn't mean to say it like that. But until everyone's memories are back to normal, I think it's better if we don't..."

"Are you okay if I do it?" Paul asked uncertainly.

Thomas couldn't look away from his father's shattered expression. He knew the hurt was fabricated because of the memories Henry gave him, but that was his father he'd just planted a knife through the heart of. He swallowed. That would be fixed once Donal did his thing to his father.

"That's fine," Thomas said, then thought better of it. "Actually, it'll be better if Francois goes first, and then after you and, well, if he's the one who fucks me the most. It's a Society magic thing," he added at the golden tiger's confused expression.

Henry moaned, and if Thomas had had any strength, he would have flinched himself off the altar on the other side.

"Someone tie him up!" Thomas yells, his voice raising into a panicked screech. "Gag him! No, get the chastity belt and put it on him!"

Francois recoiled from Thomas, then caught himself, and took zip-ties from a pouch and placed them around the bat's wrists, then muzzled him. With the bat secured, the bear undid his pant, and as he lowered them, the door burst open and an armed margay ran in.

"Whao," the margay exclaimed, raising his hands as Francois took an ungainly step toward the machine gun. "It's me, Firmin." He noticed the gun he was holding and holstered it. "This is one of the Richards still under Henry's Control. Once Chima got you, we couldn't just hope you'd get out. Going in as one of them was the best plan we came up with. Although, by the looks of it, I could have stayed in that bed." He looked around. "Where's Henry?" He looked out the door. With it open, the fighting sounded a lot closer, and getting closer.

Francois kept hold of his pants with one hand and pulled the bat up with the other.

"Good." Firmin stepped into the room, undoing his jacket. "Now we need to get out of here."

"I can't do it," Thomas said. "Henry drained my batteries completely, and by the sound of it, there's no time to recharge it."

The margay's fur darkened as Firmin dropped the jacket, then he became bulkier as he pulled the shirt off. And was a badger before the pants were off. "Lucky for you I'm here and I have an entire Thomas's worth of fresh DNA at my disposal."

Thomas looked at the door. "As good as you are, I don't think you can make me cum that fast."

The badger grinned. "That's just the more fun way to get your DNA." He touched the rat's bloody ankle and raised the stained finger.

Francois cursed in French and stepped toward the machine gun.

"Oh relax, I'm not going to lick the stuff." The dark gray fur turned pale. "I just want to show myself that's all it really takes." The finger became white that propagated up the arm, head, then his other side and chest, turning black where it did on Thomas. By the time Firmin wiped the blood off his finger with his shirt, he was Thomas.

"What would have happened if you licked it?" Paul asked as he approached them.

Firmin shuddered. "Lucky for me, Henry considered blood drinking his privileged, so I never had to find out, and I am not going to try it. Grab onto any extremities." He took in Eric's naked form. "And once we're on the other side, I'm going to need a recharge, so you are welcome to fuck me with abandon."

Eric looked from the Thomas on the altar to the one standing next to him, then shook his head. "My son doesn't think it's right that I do anything with him until it's been confirmed what I remember is real. I think that applies to anyone looking like him."

Firmin grinned. "Well then, I can't believe I'll say this, but you just gave me a reason to let go of this form." Something exploded in the stairwell, then the world shifted around Thomas.

Chapter 58

Thomas smiled as the door's handle turned. Seemed like someone hadn't thought to lock it. He cracked it open and distant voices came from further down the corridor. They would be who were making Thomas's life difficult at the moment.

He glanced left and right.

They weren't in sight; the station was around a corner. The only ones in the corridor at the moment were a couple of... residents. Yes, that was as good of a term for them as any, shuffling about.

He slipped out of the room and hurried away, ignoring the breeze at his back. Where to? That was the question. Dressed the way he was, it wasn't like he could simply stroll out the door even if he could reach it. Then there was his erection. It wasn't on display, but his... attire wasn't exactly doing anything to hide it, either.

He'd been stuck in here for less than twenty-four hours and no one had even provided him with sex. He was going insane.

Forget getting out. What he needed was a guy. He glanced at one of the other... residents. No, they couldn't take it. That marmot who'd delivered his lunch had been a guy. Thomas thought he'd been cute, but that was a far second concern right now. The fact the marmot had checked him out was more important. That means he was interested. And that meant that if Thomas could find him, he could get off.

At this point it was that or jerking off.

He didn't get why he was even here. He was fine. And it wasn't like they could do anything for him. Olavo couldn't, or one of the others who knew that symbol. He was perfectly fine.

Except for being horny. He liked being horny, but right now, that was driving him out of his mind. If he couldn't find the marmot, maybe any other guy would do? It wasn't like flashing them to see if they were interested would be difficult. He might not even have to pull it up. A strong wind, and he'd be exposed.

He rounded a corner and nearly walked into someone.

Golden fur, brown stripes, in a gown so flimsy he could see the white chest fur through it.

"Thomas?" Paul asked.

"Paul?"

"Should you be out of your room?" they both asked in unison, then snickered like kids.

The rat grabbed the golden tiger and pulled him through the closest door. It wasn't a bedroom, but also not a storage closet, so he didn't have to worry about becoming a cliché. There was a coffee machine on the counter with an ice machine next to it. Both were turned off, so no one should bother them. There were a couple of chairs at the back of the narrow room and plenty of space on the floor, so as much as he wanted to do one thing, they could do the other.

Thomas nudged Paul to a chair and sat on this other. His hardon literally tented his hospital gown.

Paul looked at it as he sat and smirked. "How come you didn't bend me over the back of his chair?"

"You're seriously asking that after everything I put you through?" Thomas asked in disbelief. "Donal did restore your memories, right?" He'd yelled at them to get Donal to fix Paul and his father first before he was taken away. If they hadn't...

"He did." Paul crossed a leg over the other, and Thomas looked down as the bottom of the tiger's balls became exposed. "Which is how I remember this is my fault, not yours."

"What are you talking about? It's because Henry wanted me, that he went after you."

"Who dragged you to Greek Week?"

Thomas rolled his eyes. "You didn't drag me anywhere. I needed to get away from my dad."

"Who dragged you to the Sigma Theta Gamma table?"

"That was just for the party, not to—"

"Who let slip that you were hoping to find a frat you could eventually move into?"

"But it's because I ran that all this happened," Thomas countered.

"And you had to run because I pushed you into the arms of those guys."

"You didn't push," Thomas said. "You nudged, and barely that. I was more than willing to get laid, and knowing Limbani, he'd have seen me living there anyway, and would have gotten the ball rolling."

"So it's his fault?" Paul offered with a grin.

Thomas was reluctant to hand over the blame to anyone. If he'd stood his ground instead of running scared, things would have... He had no idea, so he decided to not bother right now.

"You seem to be dealing with the multiple memories thing pretty well."

"I'm mostly ignoring it right now. The one thing that's constant throughout all of them is that you're my best friend, so that's what I'm focusing. When is Donal getting to you?"

Thomas shrugged. "There's way more important people to fix than me right now."

The tiger smiled. "You're important enough to see to it I had my memories restored. How are you doing?" he asked, before Thomas could protest that had nothing to do with him being important.

"Horny," he replied in exasperation. "Can you imagine this? They dumped me in a normal hospital and didn't leave one guy here to help out?"

"Oh, that hurts," Paul moaned theatrically, putting a hand to his heart.

"What?" Thomas asked, confused.

With a chuckled Paul pushed himself out of his chair and knelt before the rat. "I'm here," he said, his hand closing around the hard cock. "And I can help"

Thomas gasped as it moved up.

The door opened. "I know I'd find you two going at it," Judith said.

"We aren't yet!" Thomas snapped. He reflexively checked to confirm she wasn't recording this. "Now go away so we can start going at it."

"Oh, is my little brother worried I'll see him get off?" She patted herself. "What did I do with my phone? I have to record this so Trev knows what he'll be getting."

"I am not having sex with you boyfriend!" He looked at Paul. "Start already."

The tiger shook his head with a chuckle, but didn't let go of Thomas's cock. The message was clear, not while she was there.

"Why are the two of you even still together?" he asked. "I know Donal fixed your memories, since you were at the house before the assault started."

"And our love survived knowing the truth." She swooned against the doorframe. "We are meant to be. And to do." She grinned. "Do a lot of guys. Paul, how do you feel getting to know Trevor so you can join us?"

Paul looked over his shoulder. "You know, it doesn't matter how well I get to know you. You'll have to be content with watching me and Trevor if I get to know him."

She nodded. "It's going to be the three of us on the date, then the dance floor, and then I get to watch the show. Got it."

"You are not having sex with my sister's boyfriend," Thomas warned Paul.

The tiger tilted an ear quizzically. "Who's holding whose cock?"

Thomas sighed in resignation. "Fine. Judith, go away."

"Can't," she replied casually. "There's a bunch of men looking for you back in the room you're supposed to be staying in."

"Oh, now there's someone here to take care of this?" Thomas pointed to his groin. "Where were they eighteen hours ago?"

"I'm going to guess making sure a certain rat doesn't drop onto Minneapolis like a proverbial nuke," Paul said, letting go of the cock and standing.

Thomas cursed. Right, it wasn't like stopping Henry had fixed all his problems. He stood and righted the gown as best as he could. He considered chucking it right off, so they'd see the state they'd left him for all these hours, but the other patients didn't need the shock.

And it wasn't like the gown hid anything of his state, anyway.

"Before you go," Judith said, moving to outright block the doorway. "Any idea where Yating and his brother are? Me and Trevor are in the mood for a four-way."

"No," Thomas replied. "And if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"I can give you Yahui's phone number," Paul said.

Thomas glared at the smirking tiger and mouthed 'traitor' before stepping through the door his sister vacated in satisfaction.

Now to confront his torturers.

* * * * *

"Are you certain you wish to do this?" Ezequiel asked. "You do not have to. He can't hurt you anymore."

"He has to know that," Thomas replied. "And it has to come from me. I have to be the one to tell him he failed in using my family to hurt me."

When he'd reached his hospital room, Byrnwood Richard, Ezequiel Medeiros and a quietly angry Gavin Rowling had been waiting for him. Along with a small group of bodyguards.

They'd explained what the plan was for Henry, and how, in spite of everything they'd tried, the best they had managed was to delay Raphael by a couple of days at best. Thomas was his blood until it could be proven otherwise and he would come to Minneapolis to claim his family.

That should have been the end of the meeting, but Thomas had his own demands. None of them had been happy about it. Thomas was surprised there had been no screaming, probably out of respect for being in a hospital, or no throwing him over the bed to fuck him back in his place. That hadn't been his reason for making the demands, but he would have enjoyed the attempt.

He hadn't bulged, so they had.

Byrnwood had stormed out, Gavin, just as unhappy, had walked out. Ezequiel had remained. Like the others, he wasn't pleased, but there had been a hint of respect in the look he gave the young rat. The fucking had been more on the angry side, and Thomas did actually enjoy it.

Then had come clothing, and a ride in a limousine with the windows tinted so dark that Thomas only suspected they were still in the city because of how short the drive was. He didn't ask where they were. One of their counter demands as part of accepting his, was that he not know anything about where Henry was being held.

The reason wasn't given, but Thomas could guess. They didn't understand his power's limitation and only had his word they existed. He'd been in Henry's grasp for long enough, the bat could have changed his memories, and Donal still hadn't seen to him yet.

Now, it surprised Thomas no one had demanded Donal restore his memories.

The capybara nodded to the door.

"If it somehow looks like he can break free, Thomas," Ezequiel said, "or if you are even slightly afraid, the app on your phone will release a knock out gas and I will be there to pull you out."

The elder sounded concerned for him, instead of warning him about what contingencies were in place to prevent him from escaping with the bat, and Thomas believed him. Ezequiel had fucked his anger out and hadn't held on to it.

Thomas entered the door the margay in body armor opened and stepped into the room. The door closed behind him and he took a second to settle his nerves. The room was spartan, with the only piece of furniture the plastic chair—the kind Thomas expected to see by a pool—a few feet from him. A three-inch sheet of bulletproof glass divided the room into two, and on the other side was Henry.

The bat was secured to a metal cross, arms away from his body and legs pressed together. It would almost seem religious, except for the cock cage. Thomas didn't think that was something any church would want their savior to have on. He was muzzled, and the cage looked like the one Henry liked to use as punishment at the frat. Wouldn't that be poetic justice?

"Thomas," Henry called jovially, "I'm so glad you dropped by. Be a dear and pop on over to this side of the glass so we can celebrate our reunion. You don't even have to untie me, just this once."

"You really think I'm that stupid?" Thomas asked.

"It's not like you've shown the best judgment in you life, so there was a chance." The bat shrugged. "And it would make what's to come easier on you, Thomas. You won't like it when I have to track you down again. I won't be gentle in how I make you mine this time around. I won't spare your family, your friends. I will take you and I will be all you have. I am giving you this one chance. Come at my side, Thomas. Be the vassal I know you can be willingly, and I will leave your friend and family alone when I take over. No, I will give them the kind of life you want for them, Thomas. I will remove everything I did. I will take them back to who they were before any of this happened. Isn't that what you want? For them to go back to being normal?"

Thomas stared at the bat in disbelief. Shocked at the level of confidence he was exhibiting. "Take over?"

"I tried disappearing, Thomas. I tried to live and let live. Look where it got me. This time, I'm not vanishing. This time I am going to fuck each and everyone of them. My private kingdom of Sigma Theta Gamma will be nothing compared to the kingdom I will make of the Society. And you, Thomas, will help me make it happen. You will be my favorite fuck toy."

Thomas snorted. "Yeah, Dream on."

"It isn't a dream." Henry shook a restrained arm. "This isn't going to hold me. All it's going to take if for me to get one cut, for one of my captor to be curious what I taste like, and then, I'll be free and you will..." the bat smiled. "Or is that really why you're here? Are you here seeking my protection? I expect Raphael is eager to claim you. I doubt you're looking forward to that room he kept you in, all the men who used you and

left you there, like some cum rag.” He smiled. “Have me with you when he comes. I’ll sample his memories, shape them into someone who will beg for the privilege of sucking your cock.” He snickered. “Oh, the troubles that could have been avoided if I’d had his memories before any of this started.”

He sighed. “It’s his fault, really. I couldn’t get him right just going from what Madoc had heard. Of course, making him forget his son might not have help, but he couldn’t have both his son and his elder’s trust.” The bat shrugged. “Live and learn, I suppose. That’s the nice thing about living as long as I do. There is always time to learn. Speaking of which, where is Horst, Thomas? Where is my son?”

Thomas saw it at that moment, that thing the speech and promises and threats covered. Fear.

For a second, Thomas thought it was for Horst’s safety, that maybe somehow, Henry care that his son was safe because it was what a father wanted for his son. But he also saw the hunger there. Horst wasn’t his son. He was Henry’s future. Another eighteen years as a young man. Was Henry afraid of growing old?

The why of the fear didn’t matter. All that matter was that it was there. That it told Thomas how to hurt this man, this monster. How to figuratively stab him in the heart, twist and twist again. And all that would only be a fraction of the pain the bat inflicted to Thomas and the people close to him.

It was so tempting to be that petty.

“He’s fine,” Thomas said. “Not that you’ll see him again.”

The bat rolled his eyes. “Such confidence in the young,” he said mockingly.

“Tell me something. Is there anything of Henry in there, or is Hendrick the only one rattling in there?”

“Henry wasn’t real. He was never more than a placeholder for me. I am who this body was meant for. It isn’t my son they took from me, it’s my body. If you don’t play a part in helping me get it back, Thomas, I will make you pay dearly for the part you played in taking it away.”

“You’re not getting *him* back,” Thomas said. “In fact, this is the last of the hours you have left. Not long after I leave, someone will come into your cell, and that’s it. Heindrick is no more. The end. You never get to bother anyone again.”

The bat snorted. “They aren’t going to kill me. I’m the last of my line and these old cocks are too scared of what it means for a line to end to risk it. It happened once, you know, and they were terrified. So they might keep me like this, but more likely, they’ll make me a comfortable cell they’ll be sure I can’t escape from. They’ll use men they are certain I can’t subvert to satisfy me, but they’ll make a mistake.” His smile was nasty. “Then, Thomas, you will be mine again.”

The smile Thomas responded with was filled with happiness. “You have no idea how glad I am you think that, Henry. Because when they told me what they’re planning, I twisted their cocks to be the one to tell you, and I hoped you’d be so full of yourself you’d forget one little detail.”

“And pray tell,” Henry said mockingly, when Thomas’s pause stretched, “what did I forget?”

“You aren’t the last of your line.”

The bat snorted.

“Horst is the last. With him alive, they don’t need you. So, in a few hours, you are dead.”

Thomas wished his word were the literal truth as the realization sank into the bat as the smirk turned in to shock. The bat should die. The chances he’d hurt someone were too high, but he was right about how terrified the elders were that another line might end. And they were willing to take a lot of risks to ensure it didn’t happen this time.

At least they weren’t being the idiots Henry took them to be. There wouldn’t be a gilded cage. There wouldn’t even be a drab one. Henry wouldn’t be dead, but he would be stored in a coffin. Frozen in time by magic, just in case something happened to Horst before he was of age to become a father.

“You lose, Henry. You wanted to use me. You screwed with my memories, that of my friend, that of my family, that of my frat brothers. But in the end, you lose and I was part of that. You will never threaten me, my family, my friends, or anyone ever again. I get to live on. You end.”

Thomas turned and headed for the door. Henry’s end wasn’t as final as Thomas thought it should be, but he was now entirely out of his life. The other could fight over who had the most claim to hold the coffin. Thomas didn’t care. He had his own plans, and finally, they didn’t have to take a bat into account anymore.

Henry stared screaming as Thomas reached the door and he paused to take in the desperation in that voice, in those promises, in those threats. Thomas had experienced desperation because of that bat, so it was only fair that Thomas caused him to feel it in return.

Chapter 59

Chaos was all around Thomas, raised voices and people moving in all directions. His mother was ordering Margays about, even if, when the chaos had started the previous day, they were only supposed to be there to ensure Thomas and his family were safe. Raphael might still be on his way, but that wouldn't stop him from trying to sneak people into the city to capture Thomas before he arrived.

Being recognized as part of the Lewiston bloodline by the whole of the Society gave the elder a lot more power than Thomas thought was good for him.

Boxes were carried to the van outside, along with furniture and appliances. A collie had the fridge over his shoulder, with a badger carrying a box of pots and pan. Thomas hadn't seen Hubert and Jacques arrive, but that means that while he wouldn't recognize him, Firmin was also here, and that was good.

Thomas headed to the closed door ahead of a bear with a stack of boxes as Nadia looked about to give him an order. The only trick to not falling under his mother's orchestrating power was to be already busy doing something, such as, opening the door for someone with their hands full, then stepping aside as the rat on the other side hurried in before the bear walked over him.

"You're back," Thomas told his father, then stiffen as the man hugged and kissed him. When the tongue parted his lips, Thomas overcame the shock, and he moved Eric away. "Damn it, Dad. We talked about this."

"Sorry," his father replied. "I thought that now that your memories are all restored, we'd be good." He looked concerned. "They are all restored, right?"

"Yes, and not one of them included the sex you want us to have." Thomas tried to not sound exasperated. Yes, the memories Henry had given them felt as real as what they had actually lived, but it only took a little studying of them to work out which ones were true and which ones were fabricated. Henry was good, but he wasn't a god. There were always mistakes to be found when you bothered looking. It was how Thomas had gotten Eric to break through the memories Henry had given him and save his son.

But his father didn't seem to have any interest in looking at them too deeply now.

"Dad, Samuel said that he can—"

Eric place a finger on Thomas's lips. "No. I'm not forgetting any of this. I'm not going back to being a father who just saw how his son hadn't made up his mind about the way the rest of his life needed to go and somehow thought that was his fault." He took Thomas's head in his hands and looked him in the eyes. "Thomas, I got to see my son be a man, fight through his fears and the danger, and stand tall. I saw you tell Henry, while he had you in his power, to go fuck himself. You forced me to think, to consider what was going on. You reminded me of what mattered to me, Thomas. I am so proud of you."

Before Thomas could protest, his father kissed his forehead.

"I don't care how long it takes, Son. And if the relationship I know we can have isn't one, you'll ever be comfortable with, that's okay, too. You are a man, you get to make whatever decision you decide is right for you and I will always love you."

He could see in his father's eyes how difficult that was to say, but also the determination to stick to it. Eric would always do what he felt was best for his son, and it made Thomas love his father even more.

"Eric, honey," his mother called, "stop making out with our son and come help."

"Love calls," his father replied. "You still doing what you said?"

Thomas nodded. "Just waiting for the signal."

"Better say out of your mother's sight until then. She will rope you into helping to the point you'll forget about it." Eric swatted his son's ass before heading to his wife. As Nadia opened her mouth to call to Thomas, Eric kisses her hard. Then hands were roaming where they really had no business in public, and he used the distraction to head upstairs.

This might be the first time his father used sex to rescue Thomas from his mother. That was usually her technique when Eric was too focused on helping Thomas with his life.

"You know my family can keep you safe, right?" Kuno said, falling into step with him.

His friend had been hurt when Thomas and his family had accepted the offer from Yating and Yahui's elder instead of the Richard's. Thomas hadn't really voiced an opinion any which way when his family had talked it over. His personal concern was with how he put his foot down with Byrnwood to have the chance to hurt Henry. How, probably, even now that he had all his memories restored, few of the elders who knew about

him seem to trust him entirely or see him as anything more than an asset to be kept on the balance sheet for the day they needed him.

In the end, it had come down to the fact that the Xu family was fully integrated with the Guan, so his mother and sister wouldn't feel like the odd ones out.

But there was also a practical reason not to go to the Richards for safety.

"Kuno, Raphael's going to go on the warpath when he finds out I'm gone. If you were the ones keeping me from him, I don't think there is anything he wouldn't do to your family in trying to get me back. And after this little kick hit his balls as firmly as I hope it does, you don't want his retaliation in your family's direction. But we will be back, I promise, Minneapolis is our home, that's why we're having you keep our stuff safe, if not us. This is going to blow over at some point or, from the stories Samuel told me, Raphael's going to piss off someone that forced him to forget about me and we'll be back in our home."

The margay nodded. "I wish I could help. I have all this military knowhow, and I don't get to use it to help a friend."

Thomas glanced at his friend. "How come nearly everyone seems okay with multiple set of memories? Madoc and Gilbert are about the only ones really angry. Even my dad's okay with it."

"Henry took something precious from them," Kuno said. "he gave me skills. I mean, he had me do some horrible stuff with my ice, and I am talking with a shrink about some of the stuff he has me remembering doing, but I'm okay on the whole."

"I'm glad you are, then. As for helping me, the same reason applies. If there's any report of a margay helping, Raphael will use that to declare war on your family, and I will not be the reason that happens."

"It wouldn't be. Whatever happens is on Raphael, not you."

Thomas faced his friend. "So everyone keeps telling me," he replied heatedly. "But Raphael's involved because of my power. I doubt he'd give this much of a damn if all I could do was light up a room with my smile or something. I know that wouldn't have changed what Henry did to you and how you fought against us, but I'm not going to make things worse for you, Kuno. You've already been through enough. Frat brothers keep each other out of harm's way, right?"

The margay hugged him tightly. "You better fucking appear in my bed at some point, otherwise I will hunt you down. I have the skills now."

Thomas chuckled. "You're going to have to move bedroom. I don't have yours as my landing spot." He pulled away. "I need to make sure all my stuff's gone before it's time for things to start."

Kuno nodded and headed back down while Thomas stepped into his empty bedroom.

He checked the closet, as well as the dresser drawers, and found an old card from some collectible thing he vaguely remember from when he was a kid.

He hadn't had a lot to pack. The important stuff was at the frat, and Kuno and the others would see to it they were packed and stored with the rest, once they were allowed there again.

Thomas hadn't been told everything that went into making the decision, but one of the reason he had been told for the frat to be shut down for the rest of the year, and possibly longer, was that the existence of a hidden set of living quarter, where Yahui had been the entire time Thomas had lived there, meant the needed to go over every inch in case the bat had done other things to the building.

It meant that once Sigma Theta Gamma was occupied again, it would probably be an entirely new set of guys there, offering unending sex to a campus that was probably starved for by that point.

A knock made Thomas look over his shoulder. Roland stood in the doorway, looking uncomfortable, and Thomas readied himself for a variation of what had happened with his father. This might be worse, actually. Unlike with his Eric, Thomas hadn't talked with his brother, hadn't found the opportunity to explain things to him. This was the first time they'd done more than walk by one another as they boxed stuff, since his brother had clobbered Thomas.

"I'm not coming in," Roland said resolutely. "I want to, but I'm still sorting stuff out in there." He tapped the side of his head. "But there's one thing I need to tell you."

Thomas readied himself, then nodded. This wasn't going to be pretty.

"I want you," Roland stated.

There it was. "No, you don't. That's just what Henry made you think. That's part of what you have to work out. You're—"

"No, this is me." His brother took a breath. "Yes, what the bat did to me changes things, and yes, I know which of the memories are the ones he gave me and what I experienced, what I've felt. Having to look at all of them's made me realize why I was always so pissed with you. Let me finish, Thomas!"

Thomas closed his mouth on his protest. Once his brother had vented, then Thomas could explain

how he was wrong about it.

“Did you know I’ve seen you naked?”

“You what?”

“It was couple of years ago, you were coming out of the shower, the door to the bathroom was partially open and I saw you. It’s a real memory, Thomas. I saw you in all your glory, and I got out of there, because I felt...” he swallowed. “I didn’t know what I felt, but my body reacted to that memory. What I did know was that discovering jerking off to the memory of your naked brother wasn’t supposed to be how it went. I tried so fucking hard not to think of you those first times. I mean, even then I’d seen the guys in the team showers, so it wasn’t like you were the first naked guy I’d seen, but there was something...”

Roland glanced down at himself and Thomas looked at this brother’s tent too, and fought the images forming in his own head.

“Then there you were, every fucking day, there, within reach, tempting me. I wanted you so back Thomas, but I couldn’t have you and it was driving me insane. And it pissed me off, and I directed that at you. Now, I know it’s not wrong. Not for the group we’re part of. For us it’s perfectly normal, and I believe that too, some of the time.”

Thomas backed against the dresser, needing it to remain standing. Henry hadn’t lied. The bastard hadn’t made his brother want him all these years; he hadn’t twisted Roland to his desires, at least in that way. That means that if Thomas and Roland had talked during those years, things might have—nope, not going there.

Yet? A voice sounded in the back of his mind.

He looked at his bother at the hope and the fear in his eyes, and Thomas ran a hand over his face. “I need to tell you something to, Roland. Return the favor, I guess.” He let out a breath. “I needed you to be straight, because I couldn’t allow myself to act on how I feel about you. What I wanted to do.”

His brother tentatively brightened. “So, this thing between us, it’s not as impossible as I thought?”

“It’s not that simple,” Thomas replied. “For one thing, you’re sixteen.”

His younger brother smirked. “Like that’s stopped anyone else.”

“Yeah, how about we don’t talk about that? Just knowing you’ve been at the frat around those guys is providing my imagination with enough material to drive me crazy. I don’t need the confirmation.” Thomas swallowed. “I also don’t have that set of memories where it’s normal for me to want to have sex with my brother. I have all these people telling me it’s fine, but I still have this upbringing teaching me how wrong it is to want that. Not to talk about how some of those guys will say just about anything to get some tail. The bottom line, Roland, is that yeah, I want to, but there’s a truckload of baggage that comes with that.”

“So I work out my shit,” Roland said seriously, “you work out yours, and we meet in the middle, get naked and have hot and sweaty sex?”

Thomas groaned. “I so did not need that image in my head, Roland.”

His brother chuckled, “too bad, I can’t be the only one with it stuck there.”

“Roland!” someone called. “Stop fucking your brother and get back here. I’m your favorite, remember?”

Thomas opened his mouth on realizing who had spoken and closed in on registering the words. “You and Neil? Isn’t it all stuff Henry gave you?”

Roland nodded. “We’re still working through a lot of it, but we’re finding out we’re okay with a lot of what the bat made of our relationship. Which makes two out of the entire team. How it is that not one of them has started a lawsuit against the school? I have no idea, or how they’re dealing with knowing they aren’t actually gay.” He paused and his expression became sad. “Coach quit because of this. It’s going to make it tough on the team for the playoff. I wish I could be there to help them win, but that’s not worth the shit storm that’s on its way here.”

“Is here,” Madoc said, poking his head between Roland’s and the door frame. Thomas’s bother jerk forward at the slap on the ass the rat gave him. “Shila just confirmed his jet landed at the airport. We need to get going.”

Thomas hugged his brother, pulling him away from the too grabby other rat. “I’ve got to go. Dad will explain.” He followed Madoc down the stairs. “How’s Gilbert?”

“Bitching about being relegated to a distraction, but he and Laurence are in Kansas City. They’re hoping this is done before dinnertime, because they’re already breaking house arrest to help us. They need to be back before either of their fathers realizes they aren’t where they are supposed to be.”

“Do I want to know how the two of them can be here for nearly a whole day and no have anyone realize it?”

“No idea. Maybe the Rowlings aren’t all that great at keeping track of their family member. Ettore is

on board and in place. Trevor's already sent me the plans of the hotel, so he's more than happy to help Judith's bother." He paused, hand on the garage's handle. "What did your sister do to him? I have never heard of one of us switching side for a woman."

Thomas shrugged. "The woman in this family have a habit of getting what they want. You learn not to question it, and stay out of the way when what they want is to have you help with a task."

Inside the garage, Yating and Yahui waited for them, along with Olavo, Jacque and Hubert, Limbani and a bear, who would be Firmin. The badger and collie went over their weapons as if they'd been handling them their entire lives. Which, as far as at least one set of their memories said, was exactly the case. The two of them, along with Kuno and one missing Frat brother, had received the memories of a guy with that lifetime of training.

"Chima couldn't stay after all?" Thomas asked. "His speed would be an asset."

Olavo shook his head. "He argued with his fathers, but they were adamant he return immediately. He doesn't understand why, but something about what Henry did has them freaking out."

"Won't your father had a problem with you helping us?" He asked the capybara as a monkey saddled behind him and started undoing the rat's pants.

"You aren't going to need those," the monkey said. "trust me on that."

"My father is a firm believer in plausible deniability, so he knows nothing of this little adventure I am going on with you."

Thomas nodded, swatting the monkey's hands as he started stroking him. "You'll get to have fun with me on the other side, so hold on until then." He looked at the bear. "Firmin, are you sure about this? Isn't this going to put you in hot water with your family?"

"Scalding," Jacques answered. "This is precisely what they fear you'd do." He motioned to the bear. "Who ever that is will be who the Lewistons blame, and you will have no worries in the world."

Firmin rolled his eyes. "I'm switching to Thomas the moment he cum, so don't tie your cock in a knot. As for the family, I am helping a brother. If they have a problem with that, they can go fuck themselves."

"Jacques' only looking out for you," Hubert said sharply. "That is always what he had done, despite with Henry has us remembering. And you don't have to worry about any of us, Thomas. Raphael didn't only hurt one of our brothers, he hurt you and Madoc. So we are all eager to hurt him in return."

Thomas looked at the assembled men, his friends; his brothers, then extend his hand. They took hold of it and his arm, except for one hand, which closed around his cock.

"There's nowhere else," Limbani said innocently at Thomas's look.

"Alright, time to teach Raphael what happens when you kidnap a teleporter's brother," Thomas said grimly, "and why he really shouldn't have spent all those weeks fucking me in on the same bed in the same room. I've become intimately acquainted with it."

The smile his brothers gave him had as much viciousness as Thomas. This wasn't only about getting his brother back. This was about giving Raphael exactly what he wanted, uncontested control over the Lewiston family. Thomas would give him that by giving any Lewiston who wanted out a way to leave. And if that wasn't enough, he was going to make sure that the elder understood what a pissed off teleporter was capable of; how not even the hotel he considered his home was safe anymore.

He closed his eyes and focused on that room, that bed, how it smelled and felt while he was used.

"I'm coming Victor."

A shiver ran down his back, and his chest tightened.