

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. “Lim bani 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 make 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..."