

## Chapter 45

Bozeman, MT, 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.”

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“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—”

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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.

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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."