

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.

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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 a 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 needle 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 eight minutes and eighteen seconds before the call will terminate."

"Good to know," Grant replied, as if the comment was normal. "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."