

“And... now,” Limbani said, as they drove along Pennsylvania Avenue. “Is when the next two days 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 pot 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.”