

Chapter 03

Paul grunted as he tightened the strap holding the mattress in place in the pod.

"If you have to work that hard at it," Trevor said in his ear, as Paul stepped away and making sure the mattress held everything behind it in place. "It might be time to invest in laxatives."

"How does the response to that go again?" he asked, taking hold of the pod's door. "Right. Har de har har. Just for that, you're going to be dropped a few pegs on the list of beds I sleep in." It closed quietly, with a series of clicks and a final beep from the electronic lock announcing it was ready for him to set the pin.

"I'll suck you off if you keep me at the top of the list," the rat replied.

Paul snorted. "You and everyone else on the list. Well, those offering beds. None of the couches come with sex." Pin set, he brought up the app. "Not that I'm complaining; I never got to know those guys well enough during our classes."

"You could have gone to the Sigma Theta Gamma chapter at that SFBU."

"With all due respect to your brotherhood," Paul said. "After Henry, I don't think you could get me to step into one of those." The shipper's app confirmed the request was received, that a drop would pick up the pod within the hour. Then listed extra services they offered, if he was willing to spend still more.

"They're not all like... Never mind. Anyway, it's not like you need a frat anymore. You're on the job market."

Paul smiled, phone now away. It was so nice of his friend not to point out the connections he could have made by joining a frat. But even if he'd been allowed into it, the Society frat wouldn't have been the one he'd gone for with his history. And with knowing magic was real, and where he'd realized he wanted to take his research, he's lost interest in the biotech frats that had been available.

"Speaking of job..."

"You got one!" Trevor waiting a beat. "You're still crashing in mine and Judith's bed tonight, right?"

"Yeah," Paul stretched the word. "I think you're going to hit to bottom of the list. I mean, Niel promised me an extra special stay in his and Roland's bed." He walked inside the apartment building and waved to the guard. "But I haven't said yes to the job yet."

"Why not?" Trevor asked as Paul stepped into the open elevator.

He sighed. "The offer came from Dietrich Orr."

"Dietrich..." he trailed off as if he had trouble believing what he'd heard. "Exactly what kind of job offer are we talking about here?"

"Biotech."

"Yeah, you see, I'm going to need more. It's Dietrich. As far as he's thinking, he means the plumbing between his legs going into the one under your tail."

Paul shook his head in a mix of amusement and irritation. This was what the tiger got for making sure no one realized there was a brain under those ears. "Actual biotech. He's aware I want to study how magic can interact with the nutrient composition in creating muscle building additives, and he feels it's in line with his gym's—"

"Club," Trevor corrected. "The Orrs consider the places where they get to pursue their sexual desires clubs."

"Gym," Paul repeated. "I can't speak to the public ones, but at his private gym, they work out."

"That's more of a side effect of Dietrich only wanting men who look like him."

"Bullshit," Paul scoffed. "That's just stories. Have you met him? Spoken with him for even five minutes? Yes, he likes them big. But he's had sex with smaller guys." He stopped himself from mentioning that he and

the tiger had fucked a few days ago, multiple times. Unlike the men within the Society, Paul considered his sex life private. “Honestly, Trev, so long as a guy’s willing to worship his body, there’s a good chance he’ll end up fucked by him.”

Trevor didn’t respond, which told Paul he’d inadvertently hit a nerve. Considering the rat’s need to learn everything about anything and anyone he might have to interact with, he could guess it was that Trevor had considered those stories to be the only source of information he needed.

“Still,” the rat said, “he’s an Orr.”

“Which is why I’m mentioning this to you. You work for one of them. Do you think it’s a good idea for me to do the same?”

“I work for the security firm one of the, owns. It’s nothing like working direction under one of them. And yes, the pun is intended. He’s an Orr. You don’t work that close for one and not end up with their cock up your ass.”

“I’m quite aware of that. If I tell you it’s a personal project of his, instead of a family-related business. What would you tell me?”

“Run comes to mind.”

“I’m not the running kind, Trevor. I might cha cha or foxtrot my way out of there, but running’s a little desperate.”

“Did he swear you to secrecy?”

“We wouldn’t be talking if he had.” He entered his apartment and grabbed the garbage bag off the table.

“I’m going to arrange for you to have a meeting with one of the others. One of the Orrs actually in charge. The last thing you want is to end up mixed up with one of them and then find out they’re using out as a weapon against the rest of their family. And before you tell me Dietrich isn’t like that, he’s from the generation that gave them the twins.”

“I haven’t studied Orr history, so I don’t get the reference, but I trust you. If you say I need to speak with one of them, I will.”

“Good. I’ll talk to my boss’ assistant. He’ll know with of them I should get you to talk with. Anyway, independent of that. We are expecting you for dinner. Judith is cooking Nadia’s famous spagagna.”

“I’ll be there. I’m not missing any chance to eat Nadia’s cooking, even through her daughter’s intermediary.” He disconnected, looked around the near empty apartment, and set about disposing of what was left, and cleaning it.

With the afternoon approaching evening, He dumped the trash in the disposal on his way out the door. He signed the release forms at the front desk, removed his phone from the building’s access, and handed over the physical keys.

Then he was on the road, looking forward to a well-earned meal with Trevor and Judith.

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He looked at the clock at the bottom of the windshield. Ten minutes since he’d last checked, and he’d barely moved a tenth of a mile. Which, considering how traffic went around San Francisco Bay, wasn’t too far off the norm. It was a good thing he’d given himself ample leeway to reach their house.

He drank from the travel mug as he accessed the routing app. His route appeared on the windshield, with fifteen miles of red road. He tapped it on his way to put the mug back in the holder.

“Fires throughout the city have brought traffic to a standstill as emergency services struggle to deal with them,” a woman said. The app playing the most relevant news broadcast, as sections of the cities were highlighted. “As of the last report, a server farm, a hotel, six clubs, as well as housed in Eastmont Hills were some of the listed—”

“Elaborate on the Eastmont Hills fires,” he instructed. Madoc lived in those hills.

The voice stopped, and a written new report appeared, opaque. The section about Eastmont Hills centered and highlighted. Three addressed were listed in it, one of which was Madoc’s. The article was only ten minutes old, said those fires were under control. No casualties, but two injured and no information on who they were. The theory indicated for these fires, with one of the firefighter cited as the source, was an overloaded network causing the junction boxes to catch on fires.

Madoc’s kids would be in school, and Madoc should be at the gym. But the rat’s schedule was flexible. If he’d been home, could he be one of the injured? He had magic, after all. He brought up his contact list. Better make sure.

“Don’t bother,” a woman said from the car’s speaker. “He’s fine.”

Instead of his contacts, a pangolin’s face appeared. “Who?” how was she even there? Facecalls were disabled in slotted phones because of how distracting they were.

And that told him what he needed to know. What was the name of Thomas's hacker friend with magical powers?

"Shila, right?"

"Yeah. I—"

"How do you know who I was about to call?"

"I'm in your phone," she replied, annoyed. "The article's right there, along with the address. That house burning down is the burning bridges. He's at the Orr's club—"

"Gym," Pau corrected.

"Whatever. I'm calling because I need a ride."

"There are a dozen apps for those. And don't you have a deal with Thomas?"

"Compromised. That's why the house's burning down. The Chamber's wrecking all his arrival points within the city."

"Wait. Those fuckers are after—" he snapped his mouth shut. How hadn't he realized who she was with before? Thomas had learned about her through Grant. With the Chamber going after Practitioners...

"Unless you're standing outside my car right now, a taxi's going to be a lot faster."

"I'll guide you. Half this gridlock's their doing. The other's mine. That map's only as accurate as I want it to be. There's a road ten meters ahead on your right. Be ready to move and take it."

"That's not—" the car ahead moved. It stopped almost immediately, but it created enough space for him to squeeze onto the bike lane and scrape the sidewalk. Then he made the turn.

Then her directions took him on road his app showed as dark red, but he didn't have to slow down once.

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The pangolin jumped into the care before it had stopped, and Paul stared at her. She had a gray bathrobe over a pink jogging suit.

He tried not to smile. "Did the Chamber catch you on laundry day?"

"Funny," she replied dryly. "Drive."

He pulled away from the curb. "Where to?"

"Out of the city."

"I'm going to need some elaboration."

She did something on her phone, and the map on the windshield flickered. It had a new route, with completely different delay colors.

"Okay, now that I know where we're going, care to tell me how come *I'm* your Plan B?"

"More like Plan Semicolon," she muttered under her breath, then cursed. "The Chamber fucking found me. I don't have a fucking clue how they managed that, but they found me and burned every bridge I had. Since they knew about everything I planned, I had to fall back on plans I didn't even know I had." She motioned in his direction. "Thomas mentioned his best friend moving to Cisco to do his doctorate a few years ago. Then there was that mention of you replacing that old car you'd had since you started driving. That's what came back to me, for some reason, as I was fleeing my burning building."

Paul frowned at the inconsistency, and because motion caught his attention in the rearview mirror. "There was no mention of a fire in this part of the city."

"This is a literal information war," she snapped. "That's how they're trying to bait me into fighting them head on." She grinned. "Silver lining, they weren't expecting my apartment, or the server farms, to go up in flames. My ward talismans overclocking themselves when they started attacking. But yeah, I'm—by which I mean we—are getting out of this by doing what they won't expect."

He glanced at the rearview mirror again. "Then you need to think even more sideways. I'm pretty sure we're being tailed."

The string of curses that Shila let out as she worked on her phone made Paul's ears burn. The map on the windshield flickered again. The new route.

"Drive faster," she ordered. "Don't worry about the tickets. Someone's already in the automated scanners."

"Not what's slowing me down." He drove around the cars, slowing as one changed lanes and almost losing control. "Unless you have a way to get rid of these cars. They're what's going to limit my speed." He picked up speed once the lane cleared. Two cars gave chase. Forcing others out of their way.

"Not the kind of magic I do," She replied. "This is Cisco. Just be happy I tricked a lot of drivers into being stuck on other roads."

Paul made a turn as fast as he was comfortable doing, then cursed as the car skidded. His hand was on the travel mug the centrifugal forces had sent out of the holder, and he slammed it back in place as he got the

car under control.

“What?” he asked the pangolin, staring at him. Her eyes flicked to his hand, still on the mug. “It’s good coffee.” He licked the little that had spilled on his hand from the opening. “I’m not having it spill.”

When they appeared around the turn, the two cars were further back, having been safer. They hadn’t had to worry about losing their coffee. He glanced at the map, looking further ahead at their route.

“Is the Golden Gate Bridge a good idea? That’s a long stretch with no way to get off it.”

“Best way out of the city,” she replied. “With the gridlock the way it is, it’s nearly deserted in our direction.” She glared at her phone. “Can’t this thing go any faster?”

“Not if you want us to stay on the road,” he replied, glancing at the approaching cars in the rearview mirror. “My aggressive driving course was limited to ‘let someone else do it.’” He still picked up speed through the light traffic to make the coming light. He fought to keep his eyes open as it turned red a full second before he flew through it.

Honking erupted behind as he slowed before losing control again. One car made it through the chaos he’d caused with only a minor loss of control after being bumped. The other was stopped sideways on the other side. At least, he wasn’t the only one lacking in the race car driving department.

What worried him was that the car was close enough he could make out a gun in the passenger’s hands. “Can you do anything against bullets?”

“What do I look like? Body armor?”

He didn’t comment that she was scaled while he was furred. Against a bullet that probably wasn’t that much more protection.

Once on the bridge, Paul floored it. His goal was to be on the other side as fast as possible, and as Shila had predicted, it was basically deserted. It was only him, the car, no, two cars behind, who, thankfully, didn’t seem to be able to catch up, and the three cars ahead in the distance.

The three cars heading in his direction.

“Shila, this is going to be a problem.” She looked up and Paul’s ears burned again.

“When I tell you, make a hard right and floor it.”

“There’s nothing there, Shila. We’re on a bridge.”

“Trust me.”

Paul took a breath.

Thomas trusted her. She’d saved his best friend’s life a few times. She was magic, and he wasn’t. She could do things that defied the laws of physics, even if he hadn’t seen her do any of that, yet.

“Now.”

He made the turn, worried they’d skid out of control for a second, but when he slammed his foot down on the accelerator, the car pounced and smashed through the rails, careening into the air.

Paul’s hand moved as he noticed the travel mug lift out of the holder as they began falling at the speed of gravity, and he placed a hand on it to hold it in place.