

Chapter 11

“What is it with magic people and fancy hotels?” Donal asked, looking at the building on the other side of the street.

“It’s easy to come and go in those,” Shila said.

“And if you have money, might as well flaunt it,” Donal grumbled.

“You worked out they’re in there?” Nina asked, looking up at the squirrel in awe.

“Twenty bucks on the penthouse,” Paul said, looking up and up. How many floors did this tower have?

“I don’t know.” Donal looked up, too. “That doesn’t feel right. But, if I were them, I’d have talismans all over the place to make it hard for anyone to find them. Even I’m not immune to those.”

“You made it this far,” Nina said.

“But it might be the furthest I can ‘guide’. Any more will have to be done the old fashion way.”

“What’s that?” Paul asked.

Donal grinned. “Without magic.”

“We’re not going in there,” Shila said. “We give that Brislow guy the address. Tell him the Chamber’s here and he can deal with them. That’s what they pay him for, right?”

“Is that wise?” Nina asked. “I mean, Donal said every security company’s being kept busy by those Chamber people. Will someone who runs one of them just drop what they’re doing to look into what a bunch of... excuse me for saying it like this, nobodies tell them to look into this? Won’t it sound more credible with more information? Maybe a floor number?”

“Girly, I’m not—”

“I’m with her,” Donal said. “I’ve had nothing to do with the Society in Denver. The one of them I really know isn’t going to go to this guy to vouch for me, even if he wasn’t already too busy with his stuff. The more information we have, the better the odds we get someone to act on them.” He looked at Paul.

The golden tiger sighed. “You realize that Shila’s protection is going to fail at just the right moment, right?”

“Wrong moment,” the squirrel replied. “That’s what you mean. The right moment would be if her magic failing under the strength of their wards worked out in our favor.”

“At least you know what I meant.” Paul looked at the people milling around the entrance. “But yeah, the way things have been going, this is going to go bad at some point.”

“Sounds like you’re siding with them,” Shila grumbled.

“There’s a lot at risk, Shila,” he replied. “I don’t think we can afford to hope someone will act. We need to stack the deck in favor of decisive actions being taken, because from what I’ve gathered from Thomas’s stories is that if given one chance, the Chamber is going to unleash everything they have in fighting back and not give one fuck who gets hurt in the process. There are a lot of innocent people in that hotel.”

“I thought you didn’t want anything to do with taking them on?” Shila pointed out.

“This is still recon,” Paul said with slight trepidation. “If a little closer than I’d thought we would be.”

“And how do you plan on not getting noticed?” Shila asked. “I can’t do much against what they’s put up without my servers.”

“Leave that to me,” Donal said, moving along the street. “And follow me.”

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Paul wanted to pull at the tight collar of the outfit Donal had found for me. It belonged on a quad performance monkey, not a hotel employee. The thing was bright green with gold highlights. Garish by itself, they’d added epaulets with fronds, and a hard cap with gold buttons along the bottom. It was also the wrong

model to accommodate his ears.

What he did do, as Donal had promised, was turn him into one of the multiple, also nearly invisible, hotel employees dressed similarly.

The uniform had been in a rack left behind the hotel, by a door.

“Forgotten there,” Donal said, looking through them and handing them a uniform each.

None of them were happy about it, but they agreed they didn’t have the time to look for alternatives. Donal plucked a paper that has been wedged above the door and entered the code written on it on the lock. They changed in the first set of restroom they found, then reluctantly agreed they had to split up.

They were running against the clock, now that they were insider the Chamber’s talisman. So they had to find them as quickly as possible and get out. Looking like they belonged only worked up to a point.

So, that had meant that while he looked the part of an employee, Paul also had to act the part. He couldn’t seem to make it through one floor without someone noticing the nearly invisible employee and requesting something of the golden tiger.

There had been the elegantly dressed woman who’d shoved the tray of barely eaten food in his hand as he walked by the door, ordering him to return it and have the cook prepare a proper meal. He’d located the kitchen and returned the tray, but not made the request. One floor above that had been a corpulent man in underwear who requested his help to dress. The suit had been fine silk and fitted the hippopotamus well, and Paul had gotten a hundred dollar tip. If not for the loss in time, he’d consider that a win.

He’d made it three floors without being called to do some barely hotel qualifying work, then a pair of businessmen had shoved cases in his hands with instructions to follow them. The entire trip down to the ground floor and a conference room, they complained at the inconvenience of the emergency, forcing them to give the demonstration via teleconferencing, when the client one only halfway across the city. They told Paul to deposit the equipment on a table and sent away without a tip.

Now, the couple he shared the elevator up to the sixth floor with was going on about the marvels of excellent hotels and their luck in picking the one that kept all those people with sickness away.

It wasn’t that they were keeping sick people away, Paul was tempted to tell them, tired of the self entitlement, it was that they were sharing the hotel with the bastards responsible for the sickness in the first place and *they* didn’t want to get infected. Fortunately for remaining undetected, his floor had come up before he lost the battle of will and exited.

He went back to walking the sixth floor, remaining attentive for anything that felt off. That was how Donal had explained they’d know which room the Chamber was in when Nina had asked how they were supposed to find them. Because of the talismans, and that they were trying to see through the magic protecting them, something would feel off. Shila had added an app to each of their phones that, she was confident, would help them see through whatever personal talismans.

He reached the end of the floor without noticing anything out of place and took the stairs to the seventh. Five more floors to go after that one. Each had taken twelve of the forty-eight floors, and Paul hoped one of the others would signal they’d found them soon, because eating that delicious piece of garlic bread from the tray he’d returned had ignited his hunger and reminded him he hadn’t had anything to eat all day.

The hotel wasn’t rectangular, with one hallway and doors on each side. It was more crescent like, but with fingers around a central courtyard. It caused the halls to branch off in all directions to maxim the number of rooms.

“There you are,” someone called from a side passage as he walked by it.

Paul glanced and froze in place under the authority in that look. The vixen wore a gray suit that added to the ‘I’m in charge’ expression she leveled in his direction.

He looked around. There was no way she could be addressing—

“Don’t give me that,” she said, pointed to a spot right before her. “Get here. Do you have any idea how long you’ve kept me waiting?”

Paul swallowed and headed in her direction, since running wanted an option. She seemed utterly normal, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that her waiting for him wasn’t a case of mistaken identity. After all, how many golden tigers worked in this hotel?

Zero was the most likely number.

This was definitely feeling off. That meant he couldn’t go with her. Which meant he had to do something he really hated.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” she demanded once he was before her.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry? That’s it? You were supposed to be there fifteen minutes ago, and that’s all you have to say? Now come with me, I will not have you keeping them waiting any—”

Paul punched her across the muzzle, then hurried to catch her, shocked it had worked. Now he had to... Okay, what was he supposed to do?

An ice machine gurgling guided him to an out of the way corner and he placed her down as comfortably as he could. Once he was sure she wouldn't get a crick or something, he'd call Donal and he could get the others here. That she'd been waiting for him specifically had to mean the Chamber had a room close by.

If not, him or Shila could find out from this... the tag only identified her as a manager, where she was supposed to take him. He stood as he reached for his phone and was moving before the motion out of the corner of his eye registered.

He reacted quickly enough that as the fist registered; he knew it would miss him. The problem was that something extended from it. Long, brass and when it connected with the side of his head, there was enough strength that he felt his feet leave the floor before the world blacked out.