

Chapter 51

Alvin, TX, March 29th

Thomas wandered the house, fighting the sense of futility that was creeping up.

He'd been informed that any and all attempts to convince Byrnwood Richard to come to Houston had failed. From Gavin asked for a meeting between elders, to acquaintances of the Richard elder inviting him over for a break from the stress of running a family. Gavin had even contacted a common friend out of Alaska to make an offer, since it was possible Henry had instructed Byrnwood to refuse any offer coming from Texas.

It was now clear the orders was to refuse all invitations, period.

He'd been given access to the information the men Donal had restored had provided, as part of Gavin promising Thomas would be kept in the loop, but Thomas didn't want to be informed, he want to go out there and rescue his family.

He'd been surprised at how good rescuing Madoc had ended up feeling, despite the complications and how reluctant the rescuee was. Even Recuing Grant had ended up feeling good, in spite of getting stabbed in the side.

So what if in one case the man they'd been running away from had found them, or if in the other Grant ended having to rescue Thomas and sacrificed his staff to do it. It had felt good to be out there working toward saving them, instead of roaming in a house a thousand miles away from where the action would take place.

He walked by an open door, stopped and stepped back to look in. It was a small library, bookcases filled with physical books, two plush chairs, and a dark wood coffee table. Felix sat before it, hand on a cloth, tracing the same path on the varnished wood, his face blank.

Owen had a lot of solid wood furniture in his house, from a rocking chair that looked to have been made from recovered tree branches, a bench from what had to be lumber from an old barn, and every table and chair in the house was cared for hardwood.

Well, Owen said it was cared for. Felix had had opinions on the quality of that care. The bench and rocking chair he left alone, but the tables, he had polished with a passion Thomas had rarely seen outside of Felix angry fucking him.

And now, here he was, running his hand over a hardwood table with the passion of an inmate on the hundredth hour of the same meaningless task, for not apparent reasons.

Sure, it might not be apparent, but there was a reason. Donal had finally had time to start on the rest of his frat brother's memories, and Felix had insisted he be among the first ones. Thomas's hadn't had much time to just sit with the implication of the alteration. Stuff had hit the fan and he'd been too busy.

And it had only been one memory. After all the work with the margays and rats, Donal was comfortable retrieving months' worth of memories in one sitting. Thomas figured that once the others had had all their memories retrieved, he'd finish his session, it wasn't like he'd have a lot of them altered. And then he'd have the time to sit and deal with adjusting to whatever Henry had changed about his life.

"You okay?" Thomas asked from the doorway. He hoped he wouldn't be alone when he went through that, so he could be there for his brother, even if it was Felix and the snark he would send at him for intruding.

Instead, he got a glance, a shrug, and the otter was back looking at the table.

That was so out of character Thomas wasn't sure what to do. "So..." immediately, he trailed off. "Let me guess," he tried again, "you're morose because Henry hid that you were your Elder's son, so you didn't get to lord that over us."

"I wish," Felix replied without looking up.

Thomas had been certain that would get a reaction. Or at least some counter about how the otter didn't need to be an elder's son to lord how much better then the rat he was.

"This probably sounds as weird to you than it does to me, considering our history, but do you want to talk about whatever you've learned that's bothering you?"

The shake of the head stopped halfway. "We're better."

That was more like it. "I know. I think that was the first thing you told me when I joined the frat. How I'd never be as good as you." He sat in the other seat.

"No me," Felix replied, "us. The Chouteaus. We grow up being told how much better we are than the rest. Our city is orderly. Problems are dealt with quickly and efficiently. Each one of us, to a man, should be

proud of our name. All of us.” He fell silent. “All of them.” Another pause. “But not me.”

“Felix?” Thomas asked after a full minute of silence.

The otter snorted and threw the cloth on the table. “I’m not an elders son,” he said disdainfully. “I’m whatever the opposite of that fucking is. Useless is what they’re always calling me. Useless man, from a useless family, with a useless power. Like I went to Him and begged for the power to go on other’s dreams. Like this was my choice and I’d made a fucking bad one.”

Felix grabbed the cloth again. “Did you know I’ve had more sex in the last year and a half than I’ve had in all the years before? Do you have any idea how ridiculous that is? I, born into the Society, can count on two hands the number of time I’ve had sex with with a family member. I’ve had more sex outside of my family, than within. And that’s all because of Henry. Fucking Henry made me think I was the height of the Chouteau. That I had the confidence to go after what I wanted. To mock what I didn’t. He made me everything I should have been. And it’s all fake.”

“It’s can’t all—”

“You want to know why I’m UMn, Thomas?” the otter demanded, cutting him off. “You think it’s because of how good the curriculum is? The contacts I’d make within the frat? You think that when they sent me here, they even thought about what I could do?” He gave a mocking snort. “I’m here, because my family tried to screw the Richards and got caught. I’m here because when the Richard demanded my elder send one of his to Minneapolis as a guarantee against them ever trying something like that again, my elder asked for the Chouteau that was expendable. The one no one would miss if the Richard got rid of him. Everyone pointed to me. Don’t bother asking. No one was kind enough to tell me what they did that deserved me being sent as a hostage.”

Felix chuckled. “But that’s not even the worse of it. Oh no. Henry took one look at this pitiful excuse for a man and shook his head. He told me, the bastard fucking told me that if I was going to be a joke of a Chouteau, he might as well make me into one that though he was a real son of the family. Then he made me forget that. Who I’d been. He made me someone real. Fuck, you want to know what the real joke is?”

Thomas stays silent. He hadn’t expected this level of changes, or how Felix’s family had treated him.

“The real joke is that he never sent that Felix back home. As him, I could have stood there and mock them back, when they threw insults at me. Instead, I cowed. And bastard that Henry is. He didn’t just switch me back. He made me remember who I was going to be. He made me beg him not to do it. Plead, fuck, I even offered to be his alone once. If only he’d let me be that version of him as I saw my family again. Then, that me would no longer exist. I’d be meek Felix. Waste of space Felix. He gave me the most ordinary memories of my time at the frat. Not that anyone ever asked about my time here. Or about anything concerning me.”

Felix chuckled. “The really funny thing, when it come to you an me, is that I think you would have like that me. You care so much that one look at him, and you’d have been his best friend, and I would have loved you for it. I, Felix Chouteau, the most despised Chouteau by the other Chouteaus would have been best friend with the first ever teleporter.” This time his chuckle was mocking. “But because Henry had to have his fun, you hate my guts. When my family finds out I didn’t suck you cock and rim your ass so they’d have a chance as controlling you, they’re going to rip my balls out. I didn’t think badly of you at the party. You were a great cock sucker, and I though I’d like to fuck that ass of yours, but I didn’t really give you a second thought, really. Sorry. When Lim Suggested you join I didn’t care. I mean, it didn’t sit well that we’d bring an outsider in, but I remember how you sucked me off, so I figured you’d be good for some fun.”

“Thanks, I think?”

“Henry is who figured there should be one among us who’d see the outsider as lower than dirt. He wanted his drama and I was the lucky winner.” He slouched back in the chair. “Once this is over, watch them pull me right out, and sell me to some friend of the elder as a housemaid or something. All because Henry had to have his entertainment.”

“Is that something they do?” Thomas asked, stunned.

Felix shrugged.

“Look on the bright side. Whoever that is, they’re going to be rich, so they’ll have hardwood furniture for you to—” Thomas winced. “Or is that something else Henry gave you?”

The otter shook his head. “That’s something he let me keep throughout pretty much every version of me he turned me into. He barely altered the memory either. Just to accommodate who he wanted me to think I was. We were visiting a relative, me, my dad and my brother. We weren’t invited directly, it was just one of those large thing where everyone was expected to attend, so we did. Five minutes after arriving, we were bored, so we snuck out and explored the mansion. We’d never been in a mansion before. Our house is the definition of lower middle class. Anyway. Me and him. Me nineteen, him eighteen two full blooded Society men without

supervision. You can imagine it wasn't long before we were fucking. The room wasn't a bedroom, but it's not like we need a bed. The table there looked solid, so we were on it, going at it hard with one of my cousins showed up. It was his house we were in, and he was with a few other relatives. With anyone else, they'd have joined in. With us, he was screaming at us about having sex on his grandfather's favorite table. My brother's reaction was to say it was my idea. Dad just handed me over to punished as they saw fit."

He went back to polishing the table's surface, but he put energy in it this time. "I got lucky, in a way. I've heard stories where chastity belts are brought in as part of the punishment. All I did was spend the summer polishing and repairing hardwood furniture."

"And it didn't leave a bad taste? Being forced to do that for a whole summer?"

Felix glanced at Thomas, and the smile was genuine. "I discovered that while my life couldn't be fixed, there were something that could. It didn't matter how scratched a table is, with diligence, patience, and hard work, it can be made beautiful again, so it became something I latched on to pull me through anytime something in my life broke that I couldn't do anything about."

"You can do something about this," Thomas said, and Felix snorted. "I'm serious, Felix. Your life doesn't have to go back to what it was. If the way you remember your memories is like me, they all feel just as real, so why not pick the set that make you the guy you want to be and call those real." Thomas chuckled. "You never know, with the right combination, we could end up being—"

A door slammed. "Don't fucking tell me to calm down!" Madoc yelled.

Thomas was in the doorway before he realized it, saw Limbani pass on his way to the other rat and grabbed him, shoving him into the room and at Felix.

"I'll make it up to you," he yelled as he rat after the rat. He passed the opening door and Donal look out, worried. Fuck. He'd lost track of whose turn it was. He caught up to Madoc as the rat slammed another door shut, and grabbed it, nearly getting his hand caught in the jam.

"What else did Henry take from you?" Thomas asked before Madoc could yell at him for intruding. He wasn't letting his friend deal with this alone.

"The fucker took Pryce's mother away!" Madoc put his phone to his ear.

"Henry made you forget about her?" Thomas was confident Madoc had mentioned her during Thanksgiving, but since he'd forgotten about Pryce this time there was no—

"Raphael took her!" He looked at the screen and typed something.

Thomas tried to get his brain to shift gear. This was about what Henry had done. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he doesn't give a fuck about us!" Madoc typed again, growing agitated. "She's my best friend. Who else was I going to have a son with? Not one of those strangers he'd assigned to me." He glared at the phone. "But she's not answering my call or my messages." His face brightened, then darkened again. "Fuck. Her parents have no idea where she is." He typed again. "The plan was for her to move to Minneapolis. Once she was there, we'd figure something out to get Pryce out from Raphael's grasp." He caught himself before throwing the phone. "Henry made me forget about her like he did Pryce, but Raphael made her vanish!"

"Why would he do something like that?" Thomas asked, then raised his hand at the responding glare. "Not a Lewiston. You remember that now, right? I don't actually know your family history."

Madoc took a breath and placed his phone back on the bedside table. "Before Raphael, our families were the same as everyone else's. My mom lived with us. She and dad had separate bedroom because she's normal, and dad could fuck guys late into the night. I sort of remember them talking about slowing down and making more time, but I was nine and she died not long after that, so who knows what it was about. I was that for my son and Jennie wants it too."

He dropped on the bed. "Raphael doesn't give a fuck about families. He only cares about one, his, the Lewistons. He wants all the sons to look up to him and only him." He looked up at Thomas. "If not for all the old timers who survived to argue with him, the kids would be living in some sort of indoctrination center, being turned into good little Raphael's boys. There's been talk of someone replacing him, but nothing done about it as far as I know. I doubt Raphael took that lying down. Once enough of them die off, I expect that center's going to be a real thing."

"So all those women being kept around?" Thomas asked, recalling what his aunt had mentioned when they'd spoken.

"That was suppose to be a short term thing, ensure we had a generation with a lot of guys born, but the kids were supposed to be given to fathers to be raised in family units, but not everyone could, so the crèche was setup. Only Raphael kept the surrogate around, and they're kind of becoming the norm. A few generations and it's going to be the only way boys are born in my family and they'll all do whatever Raphael tells them to."

Possibly not even that long, Thomas thought. That mind wipers Raphael wanted to get was to make him and Victor pliable, but what was to stop him from doing the same to anyone within his family that didn't agree with him?

Thomas swallowed as he realized how much worse things could get. If Raphael realized Henry could not only make his opposition forget, but turn them into his allies, would he make a deal with the bat, instead of capturing him and handing him over for political power? And if given a chance, would Henry turn things around and make Raphael loyal to him?

Thomas fought against screaming, or running off to tell everyone they had to go to Minneapolis right now. He was just a student without much experience of the kind of conflicts that was happening around him. Owen or Gavin or someone else making decisions had to have thought about this already.

Fuck Thomas needed something to do that wasn't sitting around thinking nightmare scenario. He eyes the other rat's naked body. The way Madoc was shaking in anger made the thought of sex less appealing right now.

"How about we lift some weights?" Thomas asked. "I'm sure Owen won't mind if we use the machines here and it's a better outlet for your anger than lying there thinking of all the things you want to do to Raphael." He paused when the other rat didn't immediately agree. "And I need something to distract me." No reaction. "Once we're done, they have a sauna."

That got Madoc on his feet and moving.