

Denver, CO, January 20th

Thomas discovered that warm was relative.

The abandoned building Donal let him to certainly wasn't as cold as outside, but it wasn't what Thomas considered anything resembling warmth. Donal spread newspapers on the floor for him to sleep on and got him old blankets to pile on top of him. Donal was explaining the dangers of sleeping directly on a cold floor then, Thomas was waking up to faint light and movement.

It took a full minute before it registered the light was sunlight, and that it was Donal moving about. He stared at the rodent face covered with red-brown fur. Then Donal had him up, and they were out in the cold again. Ahead, he was informed, of the guards who checked the building for squatters.

Fully awake by the time they joined a line of more people dress similarly to Donal, Thomas looked the man over, trying to figure out what was off about him.

"You checking me out?" Donal asked, grinning.

"No," Thomas protested, blushing, and realized what it was. "Where's your tail?" he was almost certain of Donal's species now. "You are a squirrel, right?"

Donal patted his stomach. "Did you think I was really this rotund? It's good insulation."

The line lead to the back of a minivan, instead of a food truck, and the lemmin handing out coffee from it was dressed for the cold.

"Thank you kindly, Mirabel," Donal said, taking the paper cup. Thomas noticed she had filled it from a different container than she was filling the others.

"I'm just glad to see you made it another night." She handed Thomas a cup. "Who's your friend? I haven't seen him before."

"He's new," Donal replied before Thomas could come up with an answer. "It's early to be handing out his name."

She nodded. "I'm Mirabel. I'm here every Thursday morning with coffee," she smiled at Donal, "and the alternate."

The squirrel snorted before sipping his cup.

"If I'm here next week," Thomas said, letting her heat soak into his fingers. "I'll tell it to you."

She studied him, her expression growing serious. "Then I hope you've gotten yourself back where you belong before then."

Donal pulled Thomas away. "She's a bit nosy, but she's harmless." He took another sip.

"What's the alternate?" Thomas asked, sipping his cup. The coffee was on the bitter side.

"Tea. She makes a point of learning what each of us prefers, and unless it's alcohol, she'll make sure she had some on hand. But if I get here late and she's out, I'll drink what she has left." He looked at the rat. "Yes, even the horrible stuff the rest of the world's addicted to."

“It’s not bad.”

“It’s coffee.” The shudder and the tone made it clear Donal didn’t think that was many drinks worse than that. “So long as you trust where it’s coming from, never refuse food or drink. Those are hard enough to come by at the best of time.”

He led Thomas to a vent not entirely covered with people huddled into two distinct groups. On one side were well-dressed men and women purposely looking ahead, not even glancing toward the other group. The one he and Donal joined. The one Thomas was now part of.

Warm air blew up from the vent and counteracted a little of the cold.

“She is right about one thing. If you can go back where you belong, you should. This isn’t a life you want if there’s an alternative available.” Donal looked at him expectantly.

In the daylight, after someone sleeping, and with caffeine in him, the idea of turning himself over so that Raphael fellow could get him didn’t sound as appealing. But did he have an alternative?

“Is it possible to earn money in this situation?” Thomas motioned to the two of them and the others on this side of the vent. A few gave him the evil eye as a result, but he was mostly ignored.

“You’re not going to earn a living,” the squirrel said with finality, then seemed to think better of it. “But, with the right skill set, and not being too particular about who you work for, you can get a dollar here and there.” He was watching Thomas again.

Did teleporting qualify a one of those skill sets? He decided that wasn’t something he’d mention. Donal had earned his trust somewhat by helping him, but nowhere near enough for that reveal.

“I have…” he wouldn’t know unless he told him. “I need to get to San Francisco. That’s where the person who can help me is.”

Donal nodded. “Can you call them so they can come pick you up?”

Thomas shook his head. That would be in the envelope, but Grant has sounded too serious when he warned against looking in it early for Thomas to ignore him. “I don’t have their number.”

“Can you call your parents?” he immediately asked, and Thomas shook his head. “Are you running away from them?” he pressed.

“No,” Thomas replied, offended he’d do something like that, but closed his mouth on the explanation when he noted the looks he’d attracted from both groups. “It’s more complicated.”

Donal nodded after thinking. “The camel’s already broken back.” He finished his cup, crumpled it, and put it in a pocket before walking away. “Let’s go see about breakfast.”

Thomas followed, finishing his coffee. “You kept your cup, should I?”

“Only if you can think of something to do with it. This isn’t a life you want to burden yourself with things you can’t use. With a bit of care, attention and ingenuity, you can get by.”

Thomas threw it in the first trashcan he saw.

“Now that there’s no one listening,” the squirrel said, “are you willing to give me

details? I'm not asking for the whole story, just what you're comfortable telling me."

"I meant some people in college," Thomas started, feeling like what he'd told the Brislow couple had been a rehearsal for this moment. "They weren't the good guys I thought they were, and I got on their bad side when I did... something that freaked them out. My dad put me on a bus to my grandfather's, but they had people at one of the stops there to bring me back, and they've been chasing me up and down a quarter of the country at this point, and my dad was the only one who knew, so my parents have to be watched."

"If San Francisco was family, you'd have their number," Donal mused, turning into an alley. Thomas hesitated, then was following again and after another turn he smelled food, mixed with the smell of garbage.

"Look," The squirrel said. "He's my advice as someone who's been here for a while. You're better off going home. No matter how bad that might be, this is a hell of a lot worse." He picked something off the ground. "The street is not a place you want to live."

He turned the item in his hand. Thomas thought he was feeling it without looking.

"But," Donal took something from a pocket, "if you insist on doing this, you need to know that it's going to be nearly impossible for you to accumulate money." He stepped between a dumpster and a wall, which cut the wind. "I don't know how much you're going to need to get to San Francisco, but it's not going to be easy." Now he was working on what he'd taken from the pocket with what'd he'd picked up.

Thomas couldn't make out what either item were, and all thought of them left as the wind shifted and he nearly throw up from the stench.

"Please tell me we aren't going to go dumpster diving."

"Too good for that, are you?" Donal took a glove off to work with the two items and now Thomas made out one was a button that the squirrel seemed to be attempting to wedge into a mass of other small items.

Thomas steeled his resolve. "I will if I have to." He did his best not to think of it as his stomach already protested.

"It might get to that," Donal replied, then smiled, not looking up from his work. "But not this morning. The breakfast crowd will be thinning any moment and the leftovers are going to be thrown out. Those will be on top, no diving needed."

When the door opened a few minutes later, Donal put away the items. The button seemed to be secured among a toy car and a strip of metal. The whole thing seemed to be no longer than Donal's hand. He had his glove back on by the time the top of the dumpster was lifted and fell down. As soon as the door closed, the squirrel was halfway over the side and came back with a garbage bag.

He hefted something like looked to hold enough to feed four. "You want to eat hear, so someplace more appropriate?"

"How about somewhere the smell isn't murdering my appetite?"

Donal looked at the dumpster and sniffed. He seemed surprised at the smell, then led Thomas to another alley.

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Denver, CO, January 27th

The following days were rough, and the nights rougher.

Donal brought Thomas along to his job; doing the books for someone who didn't use computers to do their accounting. Thomas didn't need the warning not to ask why. The look of the men and woman in the building was enough to tell him nothing good would happen to him if he was nosy.

After Donal mentioned Thomas could do manual labor, he was put to work moving crate with others, who looked to be in a worse situation than he was.

The day earned five dollars, and Donal pulled him away before Thomas could complain about fair wages. Then the squirrel was giving him an earful about not pissing off the wrong people, and suggested he call his parents.

Thomas shoved the money in his pocket and shook his head.

No two nights were in the same buildings, usually abandoned, and with variable level of warmth. There were nights Thomas wasn't entirely certain Donal knew what building they'd sleep in until they got to it. The squirrel had told him stories of having to fight for sleeping spots in his early days, but that in time he'd developed sixth sense for where the less frequented places were.

The ziplock bag Donal had given him to put his phone in contained his backup plan.

The squirrel had been baffled when Thomas told him he didn't have one, he'd shown him the old and battered one he had, and over the following days, Thomas had watched him use it to line up small jobs for the two of them. Donal put buying time cards for his phone, just under making sure he was fed on his list of survival tips.

Thomas now had a backpack, which had cost him three days' work at the warehouse where Donal had done the books. They only needed him once every few weeks, but they needed labor every day. Thomas had almost decided against buying it, since money spent on items was money he didn't have toward going to San Francisco, but by then he'd been carrying the thermos he'd found as part of a dumpster dive for two days and had almost had it stolen the day before. The back pack was cheaper than getting a dozen coats, like Donal had, to used to store things in.

Not that Thomas knew how the squirrel managed that.

The first evening he had to resort to dumpster diving, he considered going home. That day had already been bad, with all the places Donal had shown him for food already occupied by someone ready to defend their spot. He's tried the shelters, but they were out of food by then. And after wading through the trash for nearly half an hour, the only things that qualified as edible under some very loose definition of the word, he couldn't get himself to eat.

Hunger was a bad wake-up call to fall asleep to.

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Denver, CO, February 3rd

Thomas hugged himself by the restaurant door, doing his best to soak the heat radiating from it. Steps crunched the dirty snow of the alley and Thomas sighed. In the

twenty minutes he'd been here, waiting for the lunch crowd left over to be thrown out, he'd had to chase someone away twice. He didn't have Donal's knack for locating the restaurant no one else seemed to think of.

He'd tried to be nice, the first time someone had intruded on his spot what... two weeks ago? And had been hit over the head for it, and only managed to keep his back pack because it had been over his shoulder and he was too massive to be turned over even was dazed.

He squared his shoulders and wished he had extra jackets to make his bulk more imposing. The one extra jacket he had been able to afford had wiped him out, at eight dollars. He couldn't wait for spring to arrive. He wouldn't have to worry about spending money trying to stay warm, and he'd be able to walk to San Francisco.

He stepped around the dumpster, gloved hands in fists and froze on seeing the monkey in the Thousand-dollar winter overcoat, and the otter next to him in one that would be worth at least five times that not to be overdone.

"I told you he'd be here," Limbani yelled victorious, pointing at Thomas.

He thought about fighting, about protecting his spot.

He thought about it for five seconds, during which time Felix pulled out his phone with an annoyed look on his face, then Thomas was running.

What were they doing here? No, how? He didn't care about the monkey and his visions. How the fuck had they known he was in that alley? It had been basically luck he'd found the spot.

The alley opened onto an unused parking lot. Snow blocked the street entrance, looked to have been piled on there over and over by snowplow clearing the street. The two pedestrian exits had been kept clear and Thomas ran for one of them and immediately wondered about his choice. As pissed as he was had being found, it was a reminder Limbani knew stuff.

Thomas skidded to a stop.

In their last successful ambush, the monkey had positioned the others to block Thomas' exit and only Grant's surprised arrival had let him escape. Fuck. How was he going to rejoin Donal if he shook off his frat brother?

Felix exited the alley Thomas had come from and Thomas stopped himself about to run again.

Fuck running.

He teleported three feet in front of the otter and clothe-lined him. With Felix gasping for breath, Thomas located the monkey deeper in the alley, running in his direction. He teleported again, intent on pulling the same trick, but Limbani limboed his way under the arm. Right, the monkey was limber. Thomas turned, saw the cloth bag in the monkey's hand, the monkey glancing over the rat's shoulder.

Thomas was on the other side of the parking lot, turning in time to see Yating fight to remain standing as he overbalanced right behind where Thomas had been. He was behind the red panda and brought his fished down as hard as he could on the back of his head.

And he was the one off balance as his fist passed through the panda, and then he was

on the ground. He looked to the side as he fell.

“Thomas,” Limbani said, “this isn’t—”

Thomas finished his fall next to the monkey, a foot higher than he’d been, and his fist coming down. He looked away and finished his fall in a snowbank with his hand radiating pain. The monkey was down too, but Felix was getting up.

Not today.

Thomas was lying next to the otter and kicked him in the side. It didn’t have as much strength as he’d hoped, but it was enough to take him down and get Thomas sliding away.

“Sniped again.” Thomas came to a stop at the feet of a smiling Yating.

Thomas was over the panda, dropping, elbow first, then through him again. He landed on the other side of the lot again with a curse as pain resonated up his arm. He got to his feet with the promise he was not trying that again against someone who could turn into a ghost.

What did it say about the fuck show his life had turned into that the statement didn’t sound utterly ridiculous to him?

He ran at the still grinning panda, cut the distance with the teleport and went through, instead of impacting, the panda. Something caught his overcoat, pulling his feet out from under him, and he fell in the snow away.

Fuck, that was cold without it as protection.

Fuck this. Thomas was fucking done playing around. First thing he had to do was disarm them.

He appeared next to Limbani, fist raised, and as the monkey moved to avoid being hit, Thomas yanked the bag out of his hand and teleported away.

Was Yating like him that he needed to see to use his power? That made no sense, even to him, but hey, magic, so who fucking knew. If he couldn’t see a hit coming, so couldn’t avoid it, right?

Felix was still on the ground, holding his side so Thomas aimed to grab his bag, appearing next to him to someone clearing his throat. Looking up as his fingers closed on the bag, Thomas saw Donal, held by Gilbert.

“I’m sorry,” the squirrel said, “seems I’m too late again.”

Then, Thomas saw the grenade the armadillo pressed to Donal’s chest.