

CHAPTER 11

This had definitely not been the right choice.

The small commercial lot had been next to a residential area, which had then given way to a larger commercial strip, which had, in turn, become an industrial park. With the sun close to the horizon, Thomas had had to make a decision. Press forward through the industrial park, or go back and look for a place to spend the night.

He'd pressed forward, figuring the park couldn't be too large and that any westward travel he could do today reduced the chances his pursuers had of finding him. He'd looked for a motel or hostel in the next commercial zones.

That had been when the sun was still in the sky.

He'd still been walking through the industrial part when it dropped below and he found out that the reason for the lack of traffic among the buildings wasn't that this was a slow day, as he'd thought, but, as it got even darker and few of the streetlights came on, that the park was abandoned.

Along with the sun going down, so did the temperature, and even changing his brisk walk to a jog did little to keep the cold from seeping through his clothes and fur and into his bones.

The city lights seemed equidistant ahead and behind him, so either could give him warmth, so the question was did he push ahead and hope those lights include stores he could go in for warmth, and maybe a cheap motel, or did he go back where he knew there were stores like that because he walked by them, even if there was a slim chance his pursuers might think to check that area?

He guessed it would be an hour either way. So take a chance, or go with what was a sure bet, with potential risks.

There were always those abandoned buildings, he thought, turning around to go the way he came. But he'd had enough of the cold, and he wanted something to eat.

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He stepped through the rare working street light and noticed a second shadow stretching. He clamped down on his fear to avoid ending up somewhere else along the road. It couldn't be his pursuers. It didn't matter how rich the guy at the frat was. They couldn't hire so many people they'd be everywhere.

Could they?

The shadow suddenly veered left and Thomas looked over his shoulder, catching the taillights of a car turning in down a side road. He chuckled to himself. Of course, it had been a car. He was walking along a city road, after all. Even in a deserted industrial park, there had been some traffic earlier.

He was relaxing again when the sound of cracking snow reached him and this time he kept from looking over his shoulder. It was just snow snapping under the increasing cold. Snow did that if it was packed hard enough. And it was just a coincidence it sounded like someone walking behind and to the side of him.

He looked ahead, trying to make out details he could use. Why hadn't he just kept on teleporting north? They couldn't have anyone in Canada yet looking for him, right?

He thought he had enough details in the flickering street light at the edge of what he could make out, and was trying to decide if he should risk a teleport when a car turned onto the road, blinding him in the process.

Cursing, he rubbed the spots out and when he looked ahead again, he thought he made out the form of a pickup approaching. He almost tried to jump without being able to make out anything beyond it anymore, thinking Laurence was who had tracked him down. Then he made out the crack in the still working headlight, the way the front grill was held in place with cords, and that the hood was crooked and

he relaxed again.

He didn't care what the armadillo might have to do to get here. He cared too much about his truck to let it ever look like that.

He was still trying to get his heart to slow when he noticed it was slowing, and that the back side was held in place with barbed wire and was scratched to the point it might qualify as art. He was stuck still trying to decide if running or teleporting blind was the best option—could he teleport with his eyes closed—when the pickup came to a stop and a form barely illuminated by the lights from the instrument panel reached for the passenger side and then the window came down. Grunting came through the opening, timed with the pulses of the window lowering.

Wait, this thing was hand-powered?

Thomas looked at the side again, wondering if he'd see a gas tank attached. Only those kinds of antiques would have hand-cranked windows.

"Hey," the man inside said. Thomas cautiously looked in, staying away. Dark pickup with a stranger in it. Yeah, he wasn't getting too close. Hints of motion accompanied the banging on the ceiling, then a light flickered on as the open palm was about to hit it again. "There, that's better." The kangaroo smiled at him. "Sorry about that. Light's temperamental and doesn't come up without the threat of a spanking, or, tonight, an actual one. Didn't mean to look all spooky in here. I'm guessing you have enough of that out there." He looked ahead and seemed to search the darkness beyond the headlights.

Thomas couldn't make out the cracking snow over the surprisingly soft purr of the engine, but he had no trouble imagining them. Weren't old gas engines supposed to be loud?

The man looked to be his father's age and had on an old jacket that had been patched often over a plaid shirt. When he spoke, his breath fogged.

"Can I drive you anywhere?"

Thomas took a step back, the alarm bells going off in his head so loud it was a good thing this was an abandoned area, otherwise, the inhabitant would call in the police on his location.

Damn it, why couldn't he be in a well-populated area right now?

"I'm good, thanks," Thomas replied, fighting the urge to run. Multiple warnings from his parents as he grew up, television ads during the kid's shows, and countless reports of kids vanishing on dark streets, maybe in the car of someone who looked friendly and offered help, ran in his head.

Had he imagined the cracking of snow this time? Had that been a shadow at the edge of his vision, or someone moving in time with the cracking?

"Under other circumstances, I'd call you smart for what you're doing," the kangaroo said. "But do you really want to stay out there, with whoever's sneaking about in the dark over there?" He nodded to where Thomas had thought he'd seen someone. "It's quite a ways back to working lights. I'll take you there if that's as far as you want me to take you, but you have the look of someone heading further. I can do that too."

Thomas lost the fight and looked in the shadows, trying to make out anything. There was no cracking anymore. No motion, but...

"Where are you heading?"

"Got nowhere I need to be anymore. Made my stop so I'm heading where ever the road goes. Or where you want me to take you."

The warnings rang again, but not loud enough to cover the definite sounds of someone breaking the hard snow as they walk closer to him. He pulled the door open and nearly wrenched his arm out as it jammed partway. The steps picked up speed and Thomas forced himself through the gap rather than fight with it.

The pickup lurched forward as he pulled it closed, then

cranked the window shut. Only then did he realize he might have made a mistake in getting in. The man was still a stranger and—he made out the form of someone in the darkness.

Okay, it might still be a bad decision, but it had to be the least bad of those he had. Relaxing slightly, he reached for the seatbelt and found a broken strap.

“Sorry about that,” the driver said. “Never got around to fixing it. Can’t say I often have passengers.” He clicked the dome light off, but it stayed on. “Oh, you have got to be—” His fist had almost reached it that it turned off. And the kangaroo muttered something unflattering.

Thomas thought the light almost flickers back on in response.

Now the only light came from the instrument panel, and instead of electronic readouts, he was looking at needles.

“It’s old,” the driver said, chuckling, “but with some tender love, a bit of care, and a stern attitude, it keeps on rolling.”

“Is this even electric?” Thomas asked. Hadn’t gas cars been made illegal back when the threat of climate change had been raised? He didn’t even think old-world countries relied on gas anymore.

“It is,” the driver said proudly. “Did the conversion myself. I didn’t put in a phone slot since on something this old all it’d be good for is charging it, and a remote charger’s much more practical.”

“You have a phone?” Thomas asked, ears up in excitement.

“Kid,” the kangaroo glanced at him, “I’m not that old.”

Thomas’s ears burned. “No, I mean, can I borrow it?”

“Who do you need to call?” the driver asked in what sounded like a very cautious tone to Thomas.

He still stared to reply, then realized he didn’t have a ready one. Who could he call? His family was the only ones who knew he was on a bus. His father was the only one who knew which one.

Thomas didn't consider his father would have told them, but they could have the information from his phone, which meant they had his phone. Could he risk anyone else in his family? His grandfather? No. They knew he was headed for Bozeman, so they'd know it was where his grandfather lived. Paul? No, everyone in the frat knew he was Thomas's best friend.

He was sounding like his father's talk of money allowing people to do anything was truer than Thomas had wanted to believe.

"Hey," he protested as the driver reached for him, "keep your hands to yourself."

"Calm down, kid. I'm just turning the seat's heating on." The hand moved lower and searched along the front of the seat. "As you can tell, the cab's heating's about as effective as pouring water in a sieve when you want a tall glass of refreshment."

Thomas remained alert until the hand moved away. "You have a heated seat on the passenger side, but never bothered fixing the seatbelt?" Maybe his thing was coming to a sudden stop so Thomas would be knocked unconscious and then—

"Came as a pair," the driver said. "I practiced with putting the passenger seat one in. That way, I knew mine would work. So, yeah, sorry if you don't get any heat. Haven't tested it since that one time after I installed it."

Oh, that made sense. And the seat was warming up. So at least he wouldn't freeze.

"You never said who you wanted to call."

"No one," Thomas replied, unable to keep the defeat from his voice.

They were silent for a while. "If you feel at your feet," the kangaroo said, "there's a thermos with chicken soup in it. It's supposed to be great to warm body and soul." He reached behind Thomas's seat and pulled a wool blanket. "This should help you keep any of the heat the seat will give up."

Thomas hesitated, then took it.

“Also, the name’s Grant.”

Thomas felt at his feet and found the thermos. He looked at it and the blankets. “This is looking a lot like you expected to have a passenger, Grant.”

The kangaroo shrugged. “So, where am I taking you?”

Thomas thought as he tucked the blanket around him. Grandma Royer was in the Twin Cities, so as much as she’d want to help, there was little she could do. He could go to Victor, he was in—no, Madoc had met him during thanksgiving, and he’d think to have his brother checked on. Someone had even mentioned him and his nephews when they were talking about how they had done this to Thomas. Nerio had been there with his husband, so they were out too. Corina was engaged to one of Madoc’s relatives, so definitely not.

“Bozeman, I guess.” At this point, his grandfather was the closest unless he was willing to return to the Twin Cities.

“You don’t sound particularly sure.”

Thomas shrugged. It seemed at he was stuck making the best of bad situations. Hopefully, this one would turn out as well as Grant seemed to be. He opened the thermos and nearly burned himself before he breathed in the steaming aroma.

Grant tapped the dash and a full-color LCD came on. Thomas stared as it flickered.

“Don’t even think about it,” Grant threatened.

The display became solid, giving a streaming station name, as a woman sang a rapid Spanish beat. Thomas still stared as Grant flipped through sites until a soft orchestral piece played. It wasn’t state-of-the-art, but it still felt utterly out of place among the antique the truck was.

Thomas thought about asking for the singer again, but decided he’d rather stay quiet. The music filled the silence, so he didn’t

feel the need to, and if he spoke, he might feel the need to tell Grant his story.

Thomas jerked away to the sound of metal creaking. He looked around. The light from a Seven-Eleven sign illuminated the kangaroo exiting the pickup.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Thomas mumbled a reply, trying to work out where they were. For all the help the sign was, Grant could have driven him back To Minneapolis.”

“Since you’re awake, do you want to go in and get properly warm? We can sit awhile and enjoy coffee, or tea, if you prefer.”

“Coffee.” The idea of coffee was enough to help him wake. He forced the door open as Grant tapped on his phone and the truck shut down. He directed his grandmother’s favorite curses at the cold as he pushed the door shut, then he outran Grant to the store.

“Where are we?” he asked once the kangaroo entered.

“A couple of hours west of Fargo. Take a seat. I’ll see to the coffees.”

Thomas sat at the furthest of three tables from the door, and Grant returned with two cups, along with creamers and sweeteners, and two pastries.

Thomas took hold of the cup and will the heat from it to fill him. He didn’t remember falling asleep. He’d put the thermos down once he’d finished the soup and had looked at the passing houses as he enjoyed the music, and here they were.

He bit into the strawberry danish and his stomach rejoiced.

“I didn’t want to press while I drove,” Grant said. “You looked like you needed time with your thoughts, but I’m curious as to why you feel the need to go to Bozeman when you don’t sound particularly

eager to go there.”

He couldn't tell the truth. Thomas knew that. Even if Grant wasn't a complete stranger, the truth just made Thomas sound insane, and he wasn't giving a demonstration to prove he wasn't. He picked the little he could say that wouldn't have him lying and hoped it would be enough.

“I... got in trouble with some people, and I had to leave Minneapolis in a hurry.” He hesitated. “My dad thought that hiding out at my Grandfather's until things quiet down was the best thing to do.” If not for it being at his grandfather, saying he was hiding out made him sound like he'd been exposed as a secret agent while infiltrating some evil organization.

He looked up as it registered Grant wasn't speaking. He was holding his cup close to his face and had a contented expression.

“You're not going to ask for details?”

“I don't need to know.” The hint of a smile as Grant sipped his coffee made Thomas wonder if it was because of the drink, or... he looked at the door. Could he be in on it? “But even as you told me why, it still doesn't sound like you want to go there.”

Thomas pressed his lips together. Where was he going to run to, anyway? Or teleport? It was still night and fucking cold out there.

He took a swallow of the wonderfully hot coffee. “They shouldn't have known I was on that bus. Only my dad knew. If they know where I'm going...”

“If you can't go to your grandfather,” Grant said, starting on his chocolate-filled croissant. “Is there anywhere else that would be better?”

Thomas shook his head. “I went through everyone I can think of, and someone from... those people met each of them.”

“And that would tell them everything they'd need to know to find you there?”

“Yes...” Thomas hesitated. Would it?

What had come up during thank giving? Niero and Karlos were married. Had Oregon ever come up? Niero was his mom’s brother. But had it ever come up that he’d taken Karlos’s last name? That wouldn’t be on any of his family’s phones. In Thomas’s phone, they were Uncle N&K. Mom had them as ‘bros’ and he didn’t want to think what Judith had them under on her phone. And it wasn’t like they lived in the city, like his grandfather. They were on the outside.

“Yes?” Grant said as Thomas looked at him.

“My uncle and his husband live outside of Eugene. They were at Thanksgiving, but no details came out, and I doubt they would have said anything when they were with...” his ears burned. The inquisitive raise of the eyebrow from Grant only made them hotter. Maybe they could use them to melt the snow all the way to Oregon.

“They left with one of them, but... well, talking wasn’t their plan.” Better not to say anything about Ettore being his aunt’s fiance, or that she’d watch the event. There was only so much a normal person could take. “Even if they search for them. I doubt they’ll have an easy time finding them.”

The kangaroo turned pensive, then nodded. “Okay, Oregon isn’t all that out of my way. I can take you there.”

Thomas lowered the cup down, narrowing his eyes. “How exactly is Eugene, Oregon, not out of your way?” He searched Grant’s face for any clues. “That’s like the end of the country. The only way to go further West is to get on a boat. I appreciate the help, Grant, but couldn’t your response have been “okay, let me take you to a bus station”?”

Grant’s chuckle surprised Thomas. “I’ll do that if it’s what you want, but that’s not who I am.” He paused and seemed to think. “I’m something of a wandering good Samaritan. Helping people with their problems is what I do.”

“For real?” Thomas asked, his tone dripping with incredulity.

Grant sighed. "Yes, for real."

The man had to be messing with him. Wandering the country helping people? Who, outside the movies, did that? Then again, who could teleport? And what were his options; take Grant's help or walk? Have him drop him off at a bus station, the train? And if the kangaroo turned out to be some weirdo biding his time, Thomas still had an easy way out.

"I'm Thomas. I noticed you never asked for my name."

"I figured you'd offer it when you were ready. It's a pleasure to meet you." Grant wiped his muzzle and dropped the napkin in his cup. "You ready to get back on the road?"

Thomas wanted to laugh, or maybe cry. What he was ready for was to crawl into his bed to the sound of his family moving about the house. He'd even take his parent's loud lovemaking over this.

But he couldn't go back to that.

He stood and took the empty cup and plate. "I am."