

CHAPTER-26

Thomas jerked awake as the bus hit a bump. He glanced around, unsure why he was here, then remembered the run in the snow, getting to his parents, showing what he could do. A night's sleep, then breakfast, his mother packing some of Roland's clothing. His brother complaining, Judith snickering. Roland was a couple of inches shorter than Thomas, but he'd had his muscles for years. So, unlike Thomas's, the clothing fit his frame, even if the sleeves were a little short. His winter jacket was the only thing that was his. Roland didn't have a spare, and it had been bought a few years before, thinking Thomas still had growing to do. Now it was comfortably snug.

Nadia had wanted to buy him an entire wardrobe before she let him leave, and had nearly convinced Eric to let her do it when Roland had pointed out that if the guys at the frat were as rich as their father claimed, wouldn't they have people watching like everything?

Thomas didn't think it was possible, but Eric became thoughtful and vetoed the idea.

Around ten, his family snuggled Thomas out of the house, drove to a bus station an hour north of Minneapolis, and put him on one going to Bozeman, where he was to call his grandfather.

How he was to call him? That hadn't been worked out. Madoc might have returned Thomas's phone, but his father wouldn't let him take it. He'd argued they couldn't have done anything to it in the short time they'd had it, and Eric had replied that with enough money they could do anything, and he wasn't risking Thomas's life on the change they had.

Nadia had given him just under a hundred dollars in physical money. Where she'd gotten it, Thomas didn't know. As far as he'd known, digital was the only money that existed now. She'd smiled at him when he pointed that out and shook her head sadly, as if Thomas were unaware of the real world.

The bus hit another pothole and Thomas nearly fell out of the seat. Weren't the roads maintained here? He looked out as the bus slowed and saw the exit sign for Moorhead as the driver spoke.

"We will be stopping for fifteen minutes for anyone who wants to stretch their legs. There's a convenience store, so you grab a quick bite to eat. The next stop will be in three hours. Be back under fifteen minutes."

Thomas considered staying on the bus, but his stomach protested. The sandwiches his mother had given him had vanished before the bus left Forest Lake, and that had been five hours ago.

Pulled into a small parking lot next to the convenience store with a restaurant attached to it. His stomach growled louder at the sight and he patted his pocket to confirm he had the money on him and wondered if he was going to attract a lot of attention paying that way. Wasn't the idea to not be noticed?

People hurried to exit, and Thomas waited. He wasn't that hungry.

As the departing crowd thinned, Thomas stood, only to drop back down in his seat as someone fought their way on the bus. Who wouldn't be willing to wait for the exiting passengers to be done? No one good, that was who.

Thomas peeked around the seat and what he saw between moving people was a man in an overcoat showing his phone to the driver. The answer had him turning to say something to someone outside. And Thomas relaxed. If hunger was the price to pay not to be found out, he'd pay it.

A passenger took the man's hand and studied the phone; she was a woman. Thomas remembered her as having gotten on the bus at the stop two hours after they'd left Forest Lake. She'd sat in a row at the back, but she'd smiled at him in passing. She'd been the only one to acknowledge he existed on this trip. She'd seemed friendly, but she hadn't imposed on him. Now that friendliness was going to cost Thomas. She pointed toward the back of the bus.

Any hope he'd entertained this wasn't about him vanished.

He looked at the overhead compartment where the backpack with his spare change of clothing was. Could he open it, take it out and teleport before the man reached him? Sure, if he could get it to work on command. He cursed as he looked down. The man was making his way back, pushing people out of his way. He looked more like a businessman than someone looking to do him harm, he thought as Thomas looked out the window and focused on the farthest spot he could see an apartment building on the other side of the roundabout and tried to scare himself into going there.

His heart was already racing. And someone was coming to get him, so why wasn't his chest tightening, the shive—

He dropped in the snowbank and fought the urge to jump out and attract attention. He slowly got to his feet and put the building between him and the bus before dusting as much of the snow as he could off him. He ducked into the building as someone entered and considered his next move. Could he afford another bus ticket? He didn't know. His father had paid for this one and hadn't shared the cost, and without a phone, Thomas could find out.

Did he even want to get onto another bus? Did the man coming for him know he could teleport? If he didn't, wouldn't his best move be to wait at the stop for Thomas to come back?

How had he even known to be here, waiting for him?

So this bus was out of the question. Could he make it to another stop? Was there even another one in the area? The driver had said two hours before the next one.

That... that wasn't going to happen.

What option did he have left? Teleportation? He hadn't felt as tired this time as he had the previous ones. He needed the practice if he wanted to trust it as a way of getting himself out of trouble.

He banged his head against the wall. "Stop thinking that way, you're just a university student, you aren't going to get in trouble."

The couple exiting the building gave him the side-eye. He had to stop thinking out loud. Someone was bound to call a shrink on him and where would he be then?

Padded rooms didn't have much in the way of windows he could look out of to teleport.

He looked out the door, but only saw other buildings. He couldn't stay here. The man at the bus would have to figure he'd just missed him in the exiting crowd, and when Thomas didn't get back on, they'd search around for where he was hiding.

He zipped his jacket and exited the building, looking between them until he saw the horizon. He walked for five minutes, then could make out a distant space without buildings. Would this work if he couldn't see a reference point? Was there something he wasn't seeing there because of the distance?

Maybe there was a better way.

A door slamming shut made him jump, and he crashed down in loose snow.

"Well." He stood and looked around. In the distance, he saw buildings. In every direction. "So I can do this." He'd hoped the jump would have taken him out of the city, but this was just a field in the middle of it. The sun was a couple of hours from setting, so he knew where West was, and that was the direction he wanted, but did he want to go through the city?

At this point, was there any chance anyone knew where he was? Even if they knew about his teleportation, could they figure out where he'd landed? The simplest course was to get back to the interstate and follow that. The 94 would take him to Montana... eventually.

"Fuck, how far am I from Bozeman?" He desperately wanted his phone.

He trudged through the snow north, as that seemed to be the closest way to the buildings and a road. Once he reached it, he could

see more fields further north. Should he? Going into the city meant more changes for warmth as he ducked into stores, but he couldn't practice his teleportation with so many people.

"Head out of your ass, Thomas. This isn't a movie. Do this safely." He followed the road west, leaving the commercial area as the road went from four lanes down to two and became residential. He stopped at the occasional store for warmth, and once to get something to eat, then kept going, feeling good about his decision.

(so, it's clear I'm departing from the outline when it comes to the location. It's mainly based on where the Minnesota/North Dakota state line is located(in the middle of Fargo/Moorhead) if you feel this doesn't work, we can find a more deserted location to have Thomas jump-off.)

* * * * *

This was not a good idea, Thomas thought as some of the street lights came on with the setting sun. The residential area had given way to another commercial one, then this industrial area, which, he hadn't noticed until now, when the lights that weren't coming on were physically damaged, looked to be abandoned.

The temperature dropped in time with the sun and even with moving, running; the cold was seeping through. He needed to decide, and quickly. Did he continue and hoped to walk out of this no-man's-land, go to one of the abandoned buildings and hope inspiration struck and told him how to survive a winter night without power, or go back to civilization, get warm and figure out a better plan?

Warmth it was.

He'd started walking when he noticed forms in the lengthening shadows and he had to calm himself. There was no way those were the people the frat had sent after him. He didn't care how much money they had. He didn't know where he was, so they couldn't.

He kept walking past them and told himself he was imagining that they were following him, that the cracking of the snow was just

that. Cracking of the snow, not people walking after him.

He picked a spot in the distance and wished he'd decided to teleport further north so he could stay out of the cities entirely. Canada was safe, right?

He'd almost made his mind to jump as far as he could see when a set of headlights turned in his direction. There was still enough of the sun he made out a pickup and almost jump, thinking Laurence had found him, then noticed the cracked marker light, the stuff attached to the front grill. And he was still looking when the pickup slowed and stopped next to him. The side was scratched and in places; it looked like barbwire had been used to hold pieces together.

The driver reached over to the passenger side and manually lowered the window. Thomas couldn't make them out until they banged a fist on the cab's ceiling and the light came on.

The kangaroo gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry about that. Damned light's temperamental. Won't come on until I threaten it with a spanking. I didn't mean to look all spooky in here. I'm guessing you've got enough of that out there." He looked ahead and seemed to search the ever-lengthening shadows. Then looked at Thomas again. The man look older, around his father's age, and had on an old jacket with visible patching and a plaid shirt underneath.

When he spoke again, Thomas noticed his breath was fogging. "Can I drive you anywhere?"

Alarm bells rang so loud in Thomas's head he expected the entire neighborhood heard them. Warning from his parent to never get in a stranger's cars. Television ads between kid's shows when he was younger saying the same. Countless reports of people vanishing, last seen getting into a car that had just stopped next to them.

"I think I'm good, thanks," Thomas replied, fighting the urge to swallow as he saw movement in the darkness out of the corner of his eye.

The roo nodded and smiled. "Normally I'd call you smart for that, but do you really want to be out here with whoever's sneaking

about over there? Not to say in the cold? It's quite a number of really big blocks before you'll make it to working lights again. If that's where you want me to take you, I'll do that, but I get the feeling you're looking to go further. I can do that too."

"Where are you going?" Thomas asked.

The roo shrugged. "Got nowhere to be anymore. Made my stop, now it's wherever you want me to take you."

The warnings rang again, but the sounds of steps in the snow behind him played counter notes, pointing out that Thomas was pretty much out of safe decisions. He could only make the least bad one.

He pulled the door open, and he jammed halfway. Thomas squeezed through instead of trying to force it the rest of the way as the steps in the snow moved faster. He closed it and the pickup lurched forward. Thomas rolled the window closed and reached for the seatbelt, only to find a broken strap.

"Sorry about that, the driver said. Never got around to fixing it. I don't often have passengers." He turned the dome light off.

In the dashboard's light, Thomas stared at it, it was old, with needles instead of a display. He looked for the phone slot and it didn't have one.

The driver chuckles. "Yeah, it's old, but with some tender lover and a bit of car. It keeps me going."

"Is this even electric?" Thomas asked. He'd heard of fuel cars; back before climate change became a problem, and they had to be removed.

"It is. Did the conversion myself. I didn't see a point to add something to plug my phone in, since all it'd be doing is charge it, and it does that remotely well enough."

"You have a phone?"

The kangaroo glanced at him. "Kid, I'm not *that* old."

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

“Who do you need to call?” the driver asked and Thomas thought the tone turned cautious.

He started to reply his parents, but stopped. They were the only ones who knew he’d been on that bus. He refused to believe his family would have given him up, but his father’s comment about enough money being able to make anything happen surfaced. His grandfather then? But his parents knew that’s where he was headed.

The driver reached for Thomas and he shirked back. “Hey, keep your hands to yourself.”

“Calm down kid.” The man reached for the front of Thomas’s seat. “I’m just turning the seat’s heating on. The heating on the cab isn’t as good as it could be.”

“You have a heated seat on the passenger side,” Thomas said in disbelief, “but you never fixed the seatbelt?”

“They came as a pair. Seemed like a shame to install one but not the other. You didn’t tell me who you wanted to call.”

“No one,” Thomas said, unable to keep the defeat out of his voice. He couldn’t even call Paul because if there was one person the frat knew to keep an eye on was his best friend.

“I’m Grant, by the way. In the moment of everything happening, didn’t think to introduce myself. If you feel at your feet, there’s a thermos with chicken soup in it. I’m told it’s great to warm the body and the soul.” He reached back behind Thomas’s seat and pulled a wool blanket. “This should help keep you warm.”

“This is looking a lot like you expected to have a passenger, Grant.”

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

Thomas unscrewed the thermos and breathed in the aroma. It was still steaming hot. “Bozeman, I guess.” Where else could he go? His grandma Royer was in the Twin Cities, Victor, they’d expect him

to reach out to. He'd just have to be careful once he was in Bozeman. Maybe with having forced him off the bus, they wouldn't think he could make it there anymore.

He took a sip and nearly burned himself, then was slower in drinking it.

Grant turned the radio on, and Thomas was surprised to see the display light up and not a... whatever old cars used before electronics. The display flickered a time or two before a woman started singing to a rapid beat in Spanish. Grant changed the channel until soft orchestral played. Thomas would have preferred the singer, but anything to cover the silence would work. He didn't want to feel the need to fill it with his story.

* * * * *

Thomas jerked away to the sound of a loud metal creak. There was light from a sign for a seven eleven. And the sound was Grant exiting the pickup.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you."

Thomas mumbled a reply, trying to get more of his bearings. They might be back in Minneapolis for all that the sign told him.

"Since you're awake. Do you want to get warmer? We can sit while we enjoy a coffee, or tea if you prefer."

"Coffee." The thought of coffee woke him up further, and he forced the door open, cursing the cold as he slammed it shut and then hurried for the store. "Where are we?"

"A couple of hours out of Fargo," Grant answered, indicating the tables before heading for the drinks counter. He returned with two cups, a variety of creamers and sugar, and pastries.

Thomas wrapped his hands around it, wishing the heat would spread through his entire body. He didn't remember falling asleep. He'd finished the soup, put the thermos down, and had settled to enjoy the music, and here they were. He eyed the pastries and his stomach reminded him soup wasn't a meal.

“If you don’t mind me saying,” Grant said, placing his cup down as Thomas started on a strawberry-filled turnover. “When you said you were going to Bozeman, you didn’t sound particularly certain. Is there a reason you need to go there, but would rather not?”

Thomas finished eating while he thought. He certainly couldn’t tell the man everything; he was a stranger. Even if he wasn’t, the truth only made him sound crazy. Still, there had to be a version of it that would satisfy him.

“I had to leave Minneapolis in a hurry,” he said, trying to sound confident. “I…” he trailed off. “Got on the bad side of some people. My dad thought that me going to his father in Bozeman would be a good place for me to hide out while things quiet down.” Hide out. He nearly snorted. It made him sound like he was some sort of secret agent exposed after infiltrating an evil organization. “You’re not doing to ask for details?”

Grant shrugged. “I don’t need to know.” The small smile he had as he sipped his coffee gave Thomas he knew more than he let on, and he glanced at the door. “But even now, you don’t sound like it’s where you want to go.”

Thomas pressed his lips together. “They shouldn’t have known I was on that bus. The only people who knew were my family and if they got them to say where I was going, they’ve got to know about him.”

Grant nodded and went back to drinking and eating the chocolate-filled croissant. “Alright, if you can’t go to your grandfather, is there someone else you can go to?” he had that smile again. “Someone only you’d know?”

Thomas shook his head as he reached for the eclair and paused as someone came to mind. “Oregon.”

The kangaroo waited, but instead of expanding, Thomas bit into the pastry. “Who’s in Oregon?” he asked before Thomas took a second bite.

“My uncle.” He continued eating as Grant looked at him as if

that was nothing like the answer he'd expected. "He and his husband live outside Eugene. I doubt anyone will have thought to mention them seeing as they live so far."

The kangaroo nodded, and his expression turned pensive. "Alright. Oregon isn't all that out of my way. I can take you there."

Thomas stared at the man, cup to his lips. He placed it down. "How exactly is Eugene Oregon not out of your way? That's like the end of the country. I'd have to take a boat to go any further west. I appreciate the help you've given me, Grant, but shouldn't your next step be putting me on a bus, or a train and sending me on my way?" Thomas was surprised at the amusement on the kangaroo's face when his voice was laced with suspicion.

"I could do that, but it's not who I am." He paused. "I'm sort of a wandering good Samaritan. Helping people is what I do."

"For real?"

Grant nodded and let out a sigh. "For real."

Thomas thought about calling the man out on it. No one wandered the world looking to help people unless it was a movie or tv show, and Thomas hadn't seen one camera trailing them. But then again, no one could teleport, either. And it was either accepting Grant's help or going back to walking in the cold and snow.

If Grant turned out to be some weirdo waiting for the right moment to do something. Thomas had an easy way out.

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

"I figured you'd offer it when you were ready," Grant replied. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Do you feel ready to get back on the road?"

Thomas looked at his empty cup and the plate, now devoid of pastries. He didn't feel ready at all. He stood. But sitting here wasn't going to get him to safety.

"I am."

CHAPTER 1.5-26

Thomas jerked awake as the bus hit a bump. He glanced around, unsure at first why he was there. Then he remembered the run in the snow, getting to his parents, showing what he could do. A night's sleep, then breakfast, his mother packing some of Roland's clothes. His brother complaining, Judith snickering.

Roland was a couple of inches shorter than Thomas, but he'd had muscles for years. So, unlike Thomas's, the clothing fit his frame, even if the sleeves were a little short. Nadia had wanted to buy him an entire wardrobe before setting him off in the world on his own as if he wouldn't be back in a few days. It was Roland who talked her down, surprisingly, pointing out that if these guys had as much money as dad said then they'd be able to hire people to watch for things just like that.

Thomas didn't think they'd bother observing clothing stores instead of all the ways to get out of the city, but also he didn't care. The jacket he had at home was tighter than it should have been, especially with only a week or so of recovery, but he wasn't planning on trekking through the snow on this visit to grandpa's.

Around ten, his family smuggled Thomas out of the house, drove to the bus station an hour north of Minneapolis, and put him on one going to Bozeman, where he was to call his grandfather.

How was he to call him? That hadn't been worked out. Madoc might have returned Thomas's phone, but his father wouldn't let him take it. Thomas argued they weren't tech-savvy enough to do something themselves and didn't have it long enough to hire someone, but Eric was in the opinion that with enough money they could rush

order anything.

Nadia had given him just under a hundred dollars in physical money. Where she'd gotten it, Thomas didn't know. As far as he'd known, digital was the only money that existed outside of classic movies. She'd smiled at him when he pointed that out and shook her head as if Thomas was unaware of the real world.

The bus hit another pothole and Thomas nearly fell out of the seat. Weren't the roads maintained here? He looked out as the bus slowed and saw the exit sign for Moorhead as the driver spoke. "We will be stopping for fifteen minutes for anyone who wants to stretch their legs. There's a convenience store, so you can grab a quick bite to eat. The next stop will be in three hours. Be back under fifteen minutes."

Thomas considered staying on the bus, but his stomach protested. The sandwiches his mother had given him had vanished before the bus left Forest Lake, and that had been five hours ago.

They pulled into a small parking lot next to the convenience store with a restaurant attached to it. His stomach growled louder at the sight and he patted his pocket to confirm he had the money on him. He wondered if he was going to attract a lot of attention paying that way. Wasn't the idea not to be noticed?

People hurried to exit, and Thomas waited. Even this growing hunger wasn't enough to make him risk being trampled. As the departing crowd thinned, Thomas stood up, only to drop back down in his seat as someone fought their way onto the bus.

* * *

Who wouldn't be willing to wait for the exiting passengers to be done? No one good, at least for Thomas.

Thomas peeked around the seat, and what he saw between moving people was a man in an overcoat showing his phone to the driver. The answer had him turning to say something to someone outside. Thomas relaxed; if hunger was the price to pay for not being found out, he'd pay it.

Then a passenger took the man's hand and studied the phone; she was a woman. Thomas remembered her as having gotten on the bus at the stop two hours after they'd left Forest Lake. She'd sat in a row at the back, but she'd smiled at him in passing. She'd been the only one to acknowledge he existed on this trip. She'd seemed friendly and hadn't imposed on him. Now she was pointing towards the back of the bus.

Any hope he'd entertained this wasn't about him vanished.

He looked at the overhead compartment where the backpack with his spare change of clothing was. Could he open it, take it out, and then teleport before the man reached him. Sure... if he could get it to work on command.

He cursed as he looked down. The man was making his way back, pushing people out of his way. He looked more like a businessman than someone looking to do him harm, but Thomas wasn't taking chances. He looked out the window and focused on the farthest spot he could see; it was an apartment building on the other side of the roundabout. Now he just needed to get scared.

* * *

His heart was already racing. And someone was coming to get him, so why wasn't his chest tightening, the shive-

He dropped in the snowbank and fought the urge to jump out and attract attention. He slowly got to his feet and put the building between him and the bus before dusting as much snow as he could off him. As someone entered the building he ducked into the entryway and considered his next move.

Could he afford another bus ticket? His father had paid for this one, and Thomas was too busy looking over his shoulder to check the rates.

Did he even want to get on another bus? Once they didn't find him here they'd just continue looking, and Thomas knew there was at least one other person working with this guy even if the rat never saw him.

How had they even known to be here, waiting for him? Would another bus stop be safer or also watched? The driver said two hours to the next stop, but that didn't mean he stopped at every single station. Still, without a phone Thomas would have to go quite a way from this one before someone would point him to a bus station other than this one.

So, he was at least walking for a bit. How useful was teleportation going to be? He hadn't felt as tired this time as he had the previous ones. He needed practice if he wanted to trust it as a get of jail card.

* * *

“Or you can just get put into a jail the second someone sees you doing it?” Thomas muttered, just as a couple exiting the building passed by, giving him a look. He had to stop thinking out loud. Everything happening was unbelievable enough in context, the last place he wanted to be was stuffed in a loony bin.

Padded rooms didn't have much in the way of windows, after all.

He looked out the front door, but only saw other buildings. He couldn't stay here. The man and whoever else was with him would find the luggage if nothing else, and then they'd know they missed him even if they were hired goons who didn't know about teleportation. People would start searching the whole area sooner rather than later.

He zipped his jacket and exited the building, looking between them until he saw the horizon. He walked for five minutes before he could finally make out a distant space without buildings. Would this work if he didn't have clear line of sight to the reference point? If anything that's sort of what happened on the bridge. But he still didn't know the rules of obstructing objects and-

A door slamming shut made him jump, and he crashed down in loose snow.

“Well,” he stood and looked around. In the distance, he saw buildings. In every direction. “I guess I can do it.” He'd hope the jump would have taken him out of the city, but this was just a field in the middle of it. The sun was a few hours from setting, so he knew where West was. He just needed head West, find 94, and follow it to Bozeman.

* * *

“Fuck,” he muttered. He wasn’t even in Montana yet, this was going to take forever on foot. Still, nothing to do but start walking.

As he got closer to the buildings, he noticed more fields to the north. The option to just teleport around the outskirts of the city popped into his mind. But even if teleporting short bursts in an indirect route would technically be faster than walking in a straight line, it would mean being in the cold the whole time. City meant warmth... but little chance to practice his new power for when he needed it.

“Head out of your ass, Thomas.” he chided himself. “This isn’t a movie. Play it safe.” He kept going west, found the road, and followed it. The commercial area eventually shifted to residential, the four-lane road becoming two. He stopped at the occasional corner store for warmth, once getting something to eat.

This was the right choice.

#####

This was not the right choice.

The residential area had given way to another commercial one, then an industrial area. Which was OK, until the sun went down and the street lights started turning on in other parts of the city but not right here. It was only then that Thomas realized that the warehouses and factories surrounding him were abandoned.

* * *

The temperature dropped in time with the sun, and even with increasing his brisk walk to a jog the cold was seeping through. He needed to decide where to find shelter and quick. Did he push forward and hope to get out of no-man's-land, go to the abandoned buildings and hope to find supplies to last the night without power, or go back to civilization to get warm and figure out a better plan?

Warmth it was.

He'd started walking when he noticed forms in the lengthening shadows and he had to calm himself. Those couldn't be people looking for him. He didn't care how much money the frat had, he didn't know where he was so how could they?

He kept walking past and told himself he was imagining that they were following him, that the cracking snow was just that. Cracking of the snow, not people walking after him.

He picked a spot in the distance and wished he'd decided to teleport further north so he could stay out of the cities entirely. Canada was safe, right?

He'd almost made up his mind to jump as far as he could see when a set of headlights turned in his direction. There was still enough of the sun he made out a pickup and almost jumped, thinking Laurence had found him. Then he noticed the cracked headlight and the stuff attached to the front grill. He was still looking when the pickup slowed and stopped next to him. The side was scratched in places; it looked like barbwire had been used to hold pieces of it together.

* * *

The driver reached over to the passenger side and manually lowered the window. Thomas couldn't make them out until they banged a fist on the cab's ceiling and the light came on.

The kangaroo gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry about that. Damned light's temperamental. Won't come on until I threaten it with a spanking. I didn't mean to look all spooky in here; I'm guessing you've got enough of that out there." He looked ahead and seemed to search the ever-lengthening shadows. Then looked at Thomas again. The man look old, around his father's age, and had on an old jacket with visible patching and a plaid shirt underneath.

When he spoke, Thomas noticed his breath was fogging. "Can I drive you anywhere?"

Alarm bells rang so loud in Thomas's head he expected the entire neighborhood heard them. Warnings from his parents to never get in a stranger's car. Television ads between kid's shows when he was younger saying the same. Countless reports of people vanishing, last seen getting into a car that had just stopped next to them

"I think I'm good, thanks," Thomas replied, fighting the urge to swallow as he saw movement in the darkness out of the corner of his eye.

The roo nodded and smiled. "Normally I'd call you smart for that, but do you really want to be out here with whoever's sneaking about over there? Not to say in the cold? It's quite a number of really big blocks before you'll make it to working lights again. If that's where you want me to take you, I'll do it. But I get the feeling you're looking to

go further. I can do that too.”

“Where are you going?” Thomas asked.

The roo shrugged. “Got nowhere to be anymore. Made my stop, now it’s wherever you want me to take you.”

The warnings rang again, but the sounds of steps in the snow behind him played counter notes, pointing out that Thomas was pretty much out of safe decisions. He could only make the least bad one.

He pulled the door open, and it jammed halfway. Rather than trying to force it, the rat squeezed through as the steps in the snow moved faster. He closed it and the pickup lurched forward. Thomas rolled the window closed and reached for the seatbelt, only to find a broken strap.

“Sorry about that,” the driver said. “Never got around to fixing it. I don’t often have passengers.” He turned the dome light off.

With the dashboard as the only light, Thomas noted it had needles instead of electric displays. He looked for the phone slot, and it didn’t have one. The driver chuckled, “Yeah, it’s old, but with some tender love and a bit of care, it keeps me going.”

“Is it even electric?” Thomas asked. He’d heard of liquid fuel cars, but between climate change and saving petroleum for military and space applications, civilian use had been phased out in most of the

world.

The kangaroo smiled. "It is. Did the conversion myself. I didn't see a point to add something to plug my phone in, since all it'd be doing is charge it and it does that remotely well enough."

Thomas's ears perked up. "You have a phone?"

The kangaroo glanced at him. "Kid, I'm not that old."

"No," Thomas's ears burned. "I mean, can I borrow it?"

"Who do you need to call?" the driver asked and Thomas thought the tone turned cautious.

He started to reply but stopped. His family were the only ones who knew he'd been on that bus. They wouldn't have given him up, but if they did searches on his father's charges they could be monitoring their phones. His grandfather then? But if they knew his ticket was to Bozemen would they look deeper. It's been over a day now, and the more time that passed the more dad's talk about money being able to make anything happened rang more true.

The driver reached for Thomas and he shirked back. "Hey, keep your hands to yourself."

"Calm down kid." The man reached for the front of Thomas's seat. "I'm just turning the seat's heating on. As you can feel, the cabs

heating is just pouring water into a sieve.”

“You have a heated seat on the passenger side,” Thomas said in disbelief, “but you never fixed the seatbelt?”

“They came in a pair.” The kangaroo responded, “Seemed a shame to install one but not the other. You didn’t tell me who you wanted to call.”

“No one,” Thomas said, unable to keep the defeat out of his voice. He couldn’t even call Paul because if there was one person the frat knew to keep an eye on, it was his best friend.

They drove in silence for a bit before kangaroo finally spoke up. “If you feel at your feet, there’s a thermos with chicken soup in it. I’m told it’s great to warm the body and soul.” He reached back behind Thomas’s seat and pulled a wool blanket. “This should help keep you warm. Also, the name is Grant.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow as he accepted the blanket and started to search for the thermos. “This is looking a lot like you expected to have a passenger, Grant.”

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

Thomas unscrewed the thermos and breathed in the aroma. It was still steaming hot. “Bozeman, I guess.” Where else could he go? His grandma Royer was in the Twin Cities. Victor wouldn’t be much of a curveball since Madoc knew of him. Maybe having forced him

from the bus would make them think he couldn't get that far, but he'd still have to be careful.

He took a sip and nearly burned himself. Several slow breaths across the surface and he took a more careful slurp.

Grant turned on the radio, and Thomas was surprised to see a full-color LCD display light up instead of those monochrome ones they show in old movies. It flickered a few times before a woman started singing to a rapid beat in Spanish. Grant changed the channel until soft orchestral pieces played. Thomas would have preferred the singer, but anything to cover the silence would work. He didn't want to feel the need to fill it with his story.

#####

Thomas jerked awake to the sound of loud metal creaking. There was light from a sign from a Seven-Eleven. And the sound of Grant exiting the pickup. "Sorry," the kangaroo said, "Didn't mean to wake you."

Thomas mumbled a reply, trying to get more of his bearings. They might be back in Minneapolis for all that the sign told him."

"Since you're awake, do you want to get warmer?" Grant asked. "We can sit while we enjoy coffee. Or tea if you prefer."

"Coffee." The mere thought of coffee woke him up further, and he forced the door open, cursing at the cold as he slammed it shut, and

then hurried for the store. "Where are we?"

"A couple hours out of Fargo," Grant answered, indicating the tables before heading for the drinks counter. He returned with two cups, a variety of creamers and sugar, and pastries.

Thomas wrapped his hand around his cup, wishing the heat would spread through his entire body. He didn't remember falling asleep. He'd finished the soup, put the thermos down, and had settled to enjoy the music, and here they were. He eyed the pastries and his stomach reminded him soup wasn't a meal.

"If you don't mind me saying," Grant said, placing his cup down as Thomas started on a strawberry-filled turnover. "When you said you were going to Bozeman, you didn't sound particularly certain. Is there a reason you need to go there, but would rather not?"

Thomas chewed while he thought. He certainly couldn't tell the man everything; he was a stranger. Even if he wasn't, the truth only made him sound crazy. Still, there had to be a version of it that would satisfy him.

"I had to leave Minneapolis in a hurry," he said, trying to sound confident. "I..." he trailed off. "Got on the bad side of some people. My dad thought that me going to his father in Bozeman would be a good place for me to hide out while things quiet down." Hide out. He nearly snorted. It made him sound like he was some sort of secret agent exposed after infiltrating an evil organization. He waited for Grant to respond, but when he didn't. "You're not going to ask for details?"

* * *

Grant shrugged, "I don't need to know." The small smile he had as he sipped his coffee told Thomas he knew more than he let on, and he glanced at the door. "But even now, you don't sound like it's where you want to go."

Thomas pressed his lips together. "They shouldn't have known I was on the bus I used to leave town. Only my family knew I was taking it, and if they got to them they might also know where I'm going."

Grant nodded and went back to drinking and eating the chocolate-filled croissant. "Alright, if you can't go to your grandfather, is there someone else you can go to?" He had that smile again. "Someone only you'd know?"

Thomas shook his head as he reached for the eclair and paused as someone came to mind. "Oregon."

The kangaroo waited, but instead of expanding, Thomas bit into the pastry. "Who's in Oregon?" He asked before Thomas took a second bite.

"My uncle." He continued eating as Grant looked at him as if that was nothing like the answer he expected. "He and his husband live outside Eugene. I doubt anyone will consider me heading that far out."

The kangaroo nodded, and his expression turned pensive. "Alright. Oregon isn't all that out of my way. I can take you there."

* * *

Thomas stared at the man, cup to his lips. He placed it down. "How exactly is Eugene Oregon not out of your way? That's like the end of the country. I'd have to take a boat to go any further west. I appreciate the help you've given me, Grant, but shouldn't your next step be putting me on a bus, or train, and sending me on my way?"

The amusement on the kangaroo's face surprised the rat. "I could do that, but it's not who I am." He paused. "I'm sort of a wandering good samaritan. Helping people is what I do?"

Thomas cranked his incredulity up to eleven. "For real?"

Grant nodded and let out a sigh. "For real."

Thomas thought about calling the man out on it. No one wandered the world looking to help people unless it was a movie or tv show, and Thomas hadn't seen one camera trailing them. But then again, no one could teleport either. And it was either accepting Grant's help or going back to walking in the cold and snow.

Besides, if Grant turned out to be some weirdo waiting for the right moment to do something, Thomas had an easy way out.

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

"I figured you'd offer it when you were ready," Grant replied. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Do you feel ready to get back on the road?"

* * *

Thomas looked at his empty cup and the plate, now devoid of pastries. He didn't feel ready at all. But sitting here wasn't going to get him to safety. So he stood. "I am."

OUTLINE-26

Chapter 29

###

Interstate Roads, Thomas, ???: Mood: Almost there, or Not

In an even somewhat ideal world, Thomas's worst problems with the bus ride would have been uncomfortable seats. For better or worse, we're nowhere close to there as the bus is stopped just before the North Dakota state line by police[We don't necessarily need police here, but we need someone with the authority to stop a bus.whose family among the Frat would have authority in Montana? or know someone who does?Should have looked at my state lines first. That should be one of the Dakotas, since they're closer. But yes, that is an oversight.]

[Kuno is the closest in St Paul. The rest of the Americans are Kansas City, Texas, and St Luis. Otherwise we have a lot of foreigners and Henry.]... which is eyebrow raising on its own, but when Thomas sees one of the frat members [there is a question of how a fat member could be there. Henry needed to get to Eric and do what'[s needed to gain the information from him, then contact the bus company, then make arrangement for someone to stop the bus. If it's actually stopped in Montana, that's all of Minnesota and North Dakota away. it might be simpler to jaut have Thomas over hear the officer(a State police would make the most sense here) tell the Driver he's looking for Thomas Hertz as he's showing a picture.True, that would be easier. Though as mentioned in a later comment, I had actually forgotten the Dakotas existed.]riding shotgun in the squad cars... yeah, he needs to get out of there.

In a split moment decision he decides he can't expose himself by reaching up above his head for his carry on, and instead teleports out

of there to the farthest horizon. He doesn't make it anywhere near Canada, but he makes it deep enough into the cow fields that he feels comfortable running instead of making another blink.

And from there he's running the old fashioned way... this is going to be... swell.

Interstate [it might be more credible for the meeting to be on a secondary highway. A pedestrian on an interstate would draw attention since they aren't allowed it could be on his way to the interstate See, this is where movies lie to me.] Roads, Thomas, Grant:
Mood: the good samaritan

Thomas really wished he could take the backroads to get where he was going, but he's pretty certain he'd get lost. With that said he only has a little money that mom tucked away for a rainy day, and is actually somewhat grateful that the bed ridden atrophy means his clothes somewhat fit him again... though not as well as when he got back from winter break... file that away for later.

With that said, he knows what little cash he has should go towards food... meaning he's not going to be getting a motel when it gets dark... and it's getting dark. How does one keep from freezing to death in the movies, and what isn't hollywood magic?

At about this time, a truck by the side of the road stops and a kangaroo pops his head out and asks where Thomas is going. Thomas is hesitant to answer... and in fact he's tempted just to run away. But it's really starting to get dark, so instead Thomas counters by asking the roo where he is going.

The roo [Question, did Grant have a destination here, or was he jut

letting his precog lead him? if he had a destination, I don't see a point in him keeping that hidden. especially if he knows Thomas is who he was led to. of course this is dependent on what kind of personality he has. I do have a habit of making most characters nice Grant was just letting his precog scrying lead him to someone who needed help. He may have done some searching beyond that, but he went out to find a freshly initiated Praticioner, and instead found a freshly initiated Society member. His instinct is to just give guidance and shelter while Thomas figures out what is unique about the power he's just discovered.]smiles, calls Thomas smart, but to be real here. Thomas looks like he's about to freeze to death out there. Does he want a nice warm ride or not. That Thomas has less trouble arguing. He eventually gets coaxed into the truck's cabin.

The truck isn't that warm, as it is run down enough to have some holes in the framework[does it predate phone slots? was it upgraded? is it currently powered by magic ?<chuckles>While it has magic in it, the engine still runs on gas and electricity. I do see it as predating the phone slot, and most definitely hasn't been upgraded. Grant owns a phone, but he likes his car to be off the grid.], but seats are heated, and there's a blanket... and a cup of warm soup, which causes the rat to raise an eyebrow. The kangaroo shrugs if off, introducing himself as Grant, and asks again where he's heading.

Thomas will answer this time Bozeman Montana... he's heading to his grandfathers. This just makes Grant nod, and after a moment of no further information being offered he turns up the radio. Thomas enjoys the soup, the warmth and...

###

Rest Stop, Thomas, Grant: Mood: it's time for food, questions and answers and maybe more questions.

...suddenly Thomas wakes up as the door to his cabin is pulled open. Grant hands Thomas a warm mug. Nap time is over. Time for breakfast.

* * *

At the rest stop dinner, Grant lets Thomas eat for a bit before asking again. Where is Thomas going? Once again, to his grandfathers. Grant will pause for a moment before asking, why is he going to his grandfathers. Thomas... doesn't know if he should tell Grant. Or to be exact, he doesn't know how much he can tell Grant without driving him away.

Eventually he says it isn't safe for him in Minneapolis anymore. He... made some people angry, and now they're looking for him. Grant will ask if he'll be safe in at his grandfathers. Thomas... thinks so. Grant will raise an eyebrow, and Thomas will admit to originally have a bus ride there, but he had to ditch it when the... people looking for him started searching it. He doesn't know how they knew he was on that bus. The only ones who should have known where his parents... and he leaves the implications hang in the air.

Grant will think for a good long moment, before asking if there is someplace Thomas can go where he'll really be safe. Where he's certain he'll be safe. ~~For some reason Thomas thinks of the grotto again... but that is the same as going to his grandfathers.~~ So instead he says Oregon. His uncle lives in Oregon... and unlike his grandfathers, no one should know about it.

Grant waits for a moment, as if he was expecting a different answer, but eventually shrugs and accepts the reality he's been given. Oregon isn't too much out of his way. This will actually confuse Thomas, as it is about as far away out of the way as you can get. He not stupid, he sees what Grant is doing and he's grateful for the help... but why doesn't he just toss Thomas on a train or something? Grant will smile, and says that helping people is kinda his lot in life, now.

9/1/19