

## CHAPTER 10

Minneapolis, January 13<sup>th</sup>

Thomas jerked awake and looked around, trying to remember why he was seated instead of in his bed.

The bus hit another pothole that nearly threw him out of the seat.

“You okay?” the wombat seated on the other side of the aisle asked as she put juggled the laptop the bump had nearly sent off her lap.

Thomas nodded.

Right, running from Henry and his frat brothers. Reaching his parents. Now he was on his way to his grandfather.

Another pothole and he exchanged a look with her. Was anyone maintaining the roads? Where were they, anyway? The last stop had been Alexandria, where the wombat had gotten on. How long ago was that? He reached for his phone; except he didn't have it. His father had worried it could be tracked.

He looked outside, and it was snow in the lowering sunlight. On the horizon, he saw indications of a city and also ahead of them; if he craned his neck. A sign for Moorhead came into view as the bus slowed. He worked out the distances, so he'd slept for a couple of hours.

“We'll be stopping for fifteen minutes to take on packages and let off a few people. If anyone wants to stretch their legs or get snacks, there's a convenience store, but be back on time. The next time will be in roughly three hours after we're moving again.”

By the time the driver finished speaking, they were on the ramp, then it was a right, and immediately into the parking lot of the charging station and convenience store.

As people stood, Thomas got comfortable in his seat, since he didn't feel a need to get out in the cold, but then saw the fast-food restaurant across from the store and his stomach reminded him that the sandwich his father had bought him in Forest Lake had been many hours ago and that he'd opted to stay in the bus in Alexandria.

He put the jacket on after confirming he had the money his mother gave him and as he scooted to the aisle, a commotion in the front made him look around the seatback and immediately pull back. A man was pushing his way onto the bus.

With the last twenty-four hours he'd had, he couldn't think of one reason for something to force his way onto the bud. He peeked around again. The man was showing his phone to the driver. Thomas had a sense of mass under the overcoat. Something expensive, the kind of thing Felix might wear and brag about.

Thomas couldn't see the driver, but the man's body language wasn't happy when he said something over his shoulder to the outside. Thomas was about to move to look at who else was there when the wombat took the man's hand and looked at the phone. She nodded to something the man said and pointed to the back.

Thomas was against the window. There was no doubt about it anymore. His luck kept on sucking. He looked up and wondered why he'd put his pack in the overhead compartment. It was only more clothes, but if he was going to run again, he wanted extras, since he had no way to know when he'd make it to his grandfather's place.

He'd have to stand, which would make him visible, but it was an easy latch, and there was nothing else so he could pull his pack and teleport away.

Right. Only if he could get it to work that easily. It wasn't like he'd gotten in any practice after the demonstration to his family. He glanced around the seat again in the hope the man had stepped outside to wait for him to exit, then he was against the wall.

Nope. The man was coming up the aisle. A weasel with gray fur splotched with brown. He didn't look threatening, but Thomas wasn't taking any chances anymore. He had to get out of the bus now.

He looked out the window, searching for somewhere to teleport to that would be safe from them. There were apartment buildings beyond the roundabout, closer was the convenience store, with cars at the charging station and people. Two of whom wore similar overcoats to the one the weasel had on, and there was the side of the store right there that would keep Thomas out of sight.

This was insane. He should teleport as far as possible.

But if he could listen in on their conversation, he could find out he was wrong, then get back on the bus and make it to his grandfather comfortable and warm. Right, because this guy was just walking up the aisle to ask him about the weather.

But if...

Fuck it, he needed off the bus first, then he could teleport further after that if he had to.

He focused on the side of the store and willed himself there.

Come on! He was already scared the guy was going to get him, and there wasn't going anything good happening from this. Why wasn't his chest tightening, the shive—

He dropped to the cold ground and got to his feet, zipping the jacket shut. Fuck, it was even colder here than it had been in Minneapolis. Hand in his pocket, he moved to the edge.

"No," the man by the car said on his phone. "Walter's inside. That he's not out yet is a good sign."

The weasel exited the bus holding Thomas' pack.

"Is coming, give me a second." He lowered the phone. "Well?"

"He was there." The weasel raised the pack. "One of the passengers pointed me to where he was seated, but he wasn't there when I got to it."

"You think he got off at the previous stop?"

"No, she said he was still there."

“How did he get off the bus without you seeing him?”

“Did you see him get out the window?” the weasel asked.

“Of course not. You think I’d be here on the phone if I’d seen him run?”

“Then I have no idea how he pulled off that magic trick.”

With a sigh, the man put the phone to his ear. “I’m sorry, Mister Richard. He was on the bus, but we missed him. No, I have no idea where he might be at the moment.” He paused. “Are you sure? We would have seen him exit if—alright. I’ll call you back.” He put the phone away. “He wants us to search this lot and the one across the road.”

“You serious?” the weasel asked.

“His family pays my bills,” the third man said. “If that means I spend twenty minutes looking for someone who isn’t here. I’ll do it.” The hare stepped away from the car and in Thomas’s direction.

Thomas’s hopes of getting his hands on his pack vanished, and he hurried to the back of the store.

“Fine!” the weasel called. “I’ll take the other side. Mitch, you look at the charging station, then we’ll do to the other side of the road and expand the search.”

Thomas stopped as he rounded the corner. If the weasel came that way, he couldn’t be here. He looked at the dumpster and nixed that idea without even checking for the content. From here, he saw the apartment buildings clearly. And focused on the furthest one.

He forced his chest to tighten, the shiver to—

He barely kept from screaming as he dropped into the snow back, then fought the urge to jump to his feet and get out of the freezing snow. He’d forgotten the line-of-sight thing and the snowbanks between him and the building had had him looking higher. He got up slowly, dusting as much snow off as he could. Only the roof of the convenience store and the top of the charging station

were visible, so he was safe from sight.

But he was freezing.

Someone exited the building, and Thomas hurried inside before the door closed fully. The woman looked at him oddly, but kept going. Warm, if getting wet, he considered his next move.

Did he have enough money to pay for another ticket? His father had paid, and Thomas hadn't thought to ask how much it had cost. Did he even want to get on another bus? Richard had to mean Kuno, maybe his father. Could they have people at every bus stop between Minneapolis and Bozeman?

And how had they even known to be waiting for him here?

Thomas reached for his phone, cursing when he didn't have it. Still. He couldn't call his parents to make sure they were okay. He didn't need to panic; he told himself. It might just have been luck they were here.

Bad luck for Thomas, but it didn't have to mean someone had forced his father to tell them about the bus trip. Kuno was methodical, as was Olavo. It would be natural for them to cover all their bases. And Kuno's family had influence in the entire state, his father had said.

Well, if this had been luck, they now knew he'd been on that bus, and while they might not know what his final destination was, they'd know what stop to have people at looking for him. Maybe there was another line he could get on to reach Bozeman, but without a phone, he'd have to find a terminal. The only one he knew was the one he'd escaped, and he didn't think Kuno would have these guys go anywhere soon.

Where would be the next terminal? The driver had said three hours, but there had to be one closer than that.

Thomas rested his head against the wall.

How many teleports could he do before he was too tired? He didn't feel as tired as he had even after the demonstration, and he'd

done two basically back-to-back. He needed the practice if he wanted to use it reliably as a get-out-of-jail card, but if one of them dropped him from exhaustion in the middle of nowhere, he'd been fucked.

"Not to say anything of what'll happen if someone sees me do that."

A passing couple gave him a strange look and Thomas realized he'd said that out loud. He really hoped that was all he'd said that way and that there weren't microphones on the cameras.

Fuck. The cameras. Another thing he'd have to be careful of.

He couldn't stay here. Even if those guys didn't come searching, staying put didn't get him to his grandfather's. He headed for the back of the building and looked out. A parking lot and more apartment buildings. It put him further away from his pursuers, so he exited and kept going until he came to a road, then he followed that in what he thought was roughly east and looked north until he saw the horizon between the buildings.

Could he line up on the horizon itself without seeing the details to use as a reference? Would he be looking too high automatically, or could he will some form of compensation? What were the fucking rules for this power? What if there was something in the way and he—

A door startled him by slamming shut and he screamed as he fell into loose snow. He jumped to his feet and was into higher than his knees. Heart racing, he looked around.

He was in a field, with buildings in the distance in all directions.

"Okay, so long as I don't mind the drop, I can do this." He had hoped the horizon would have put him away from any buildings, but at least he was away from those three men and they couldn't know where he'd gone to, since Thomas didn't know either.

The sun gave him the direction he needed to go. Bozeman was west on the I94. So all he had to do was head in that direction and...

He wasn't even in Montana, not even North Dakota, technically. Even allowing for teleporting when he was certain no one could see him, he was going to be walking for a very long time.

So, due west, where buildings were closer or north, where he would manage a few teleportation practices before... what? Finding out on he was freezing in the middle of nowhere with no reference point and too exhausted for another teleport?

He knew what the hero of a movie would do.

"And where's my crew with the warm coffee and blankets and heater for once the shoot's done?" fuck, he'd be happy with just a trailer to get in.

The city meant access to warmth. Even at night, there would be open stores he could duck into without having to buy anything. It also meant he could buy food since he was already hungry.

"West it is."

He sighed a spot halfway between him the buildings, tightened his chest, forced the—

The drop was only a foot, but the snow was also loose, so he was in it to his knees, but he was much closer. He smiled. And he wasn't particularly tired. Maybe he could do a lot of these and not have any problem. He looked North.

He forced himself to look West again. "Let's not be an idiot after making a good decision. We're almost to the city, and I am fucking hungry."

Ten minutes of trudging through the loose snow had him in a field with packed snow, then on the side of a road with stores on the other side, including restaurants and convenience stores.

This had definitely been the right choice.