

CHAPTER 19

I90, MT, January 17th

“It’s not,” Grant repeated, with a disbelieving shake of the head, “that hard.” He chuckled. “It’s got to be a Society ability. And that’s a no thank you. Unlike you, the bathhouse will last me a while.”

Thomas looked out at the snow-covered hills again. The scenery hadn’t become any more entertaining while he looked away. “Can I at least drive for a while?”

Grant stared at him, and the pickup drifted. The kangaroo kept looking at Thomas, stunned, as they approached the highway’s shoulder. Enough, he opened his mouth to snap Grant out of whatever was affecting him, only for the man to burst out laughing and bring the pickup back into the lane.

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Kaycee, WY, January 17th

“Why not keep going until Casper?” Thomas asked as the kangaroo pulled into the charging station. “It’s just what, an hour away? And there’s you know, stuff to do why the pickup charges.” He motioned to the emptiness around.

The charging station was the only building on this side of the highway. The other side had what had looked like houses to Thomas and maybe one building large enough to be a store, but nothing that looked like it would keep him entertained.

Grant shook his head. “We charge here and we’ll be able to make Denver tonight. Stopping in Casper isn’t—” he shook his head again, coming to a stop next to a charger. At least it was one of the fast-charging models, so Thomas would only have to deal with boredom for an hour at most.

Grant pulled a crumpled twenty from a pocket. "Get us food for the road. I don't plan on stopping again once we're moving."

"Pit stop?" Thomas asked, taking the bill.

Grant hesitated. "If we have to."

Something had the kangaroo on edge, and by the number of times he'd pulled his non-functioning phone out to look at it as they drove, that was what. Thomas hadn't worked up the nerves to ask why his phone breaking down made him nervous.

Thomas grabbed the plastic bin full of trash at his feet and braved the cold long enough to run into the building. The bored-looking marmot barely looked up from where he sat behind the counter as the electronic chime sounded.

Thomas emptied the trash into the larger trash container, then looked through the selection, sticking to prepackaged sandwiches, bags of chips, canned sodas, and a bag of peanut butter cookies.

"Hi," Thomas said as he placed his purchases on the counter. This close, the marmot looked half asleep. Had Thomas's arrival woken him? Did a place like this get more than the lone customer in a day?

"Hey," he replied lethargically. He couldn't be more than a couple of years older than Thomas. What kind of hell would a place like this be? Thomas didn't even want to imagine.

"What's exciting around here?" Thomas asked, to keep the marmot from falling back asleep.

The snort seemed to wake him a little more, and he pushed himself off the stool. "It's whatever the customers bring. Which means that most of the time it's just boring me." He looked over the items without moving them to the scanner. "Fuck, if I'm lucky, it's only a few hours between them."

"Hours by your lonesome?" Thomas smiled. "So you can get up to your own fun and there isn't anyone to stop you?"

He did have something like an hour to kill, and this poor marmot said the customers brought the entertainment. Of course, Thomas couldn't be sure he'd be interested.

"Like there's anything fun I can get up to on my own in this dump," the cashier scoffed, scanning the first of the sandwich.

Thomas leaned forward and gave the marmot his best smile. "But you aren't alone right now." Grant had said he needed to get in the habit of having as much sex as he could. The worse that would happen now was the marmot turning him down.

But the confusion as the marmot looked at him wasn't outright refusal.

Thomas licked his lips the way he'd seen his mother do to his father when she'd wanted him to know they were about to have some fun. He hoped it would have the same effect here, and that it wasn't a secret code between them.

"Are you..." the marmot looked around. "Is this?" he shook himself and leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Are you actually offering to blow me?"

"If that's what you want." Thomas gave a casual shrug. "We can get up to more, if you want." That was basically a yes, wasn't it? The marmot wasn't kicking him out, laughing at him, or looking disgusted at the idea. The state of confusion that was back again made Thomas wonder about his intellect, but he figured he could help settle things easily enough.

He walked around the counter; the marmot watching him, but not doing or saying anything to cause Thomas to stop. The cashier took one step back as Thomas entered his personal space, but then stopped and let the rat press against him.

The marmot gasped as Thomas cupped his groin. Yes, the hard cock he felt definitely qualified as a yes. The cashier whimpered as Thomas rubbed it while reaching for the tail strap. That undone, his hand was inside and he raised an eyebrow as he encountered fur instead of underwear, then hard and leaking flesh.

Thomas smiled. Other than the guys at the frat, and their games of making his underwear vanish, this was the first guy he'd encountered going commando.

The moan that escaped the marmot was needy as Thomas squeezed the shaft, and the rat hooked the waistband, intent on tasting what was there. A blowjob had been mentioned so—

Something hit the bay window hard enough Thomas looked around the dazed marmot. It was dark enough the lights had come on and the wind was dragging a trashcan. He looked up. The clouds were even darker. Where had they come from? It had been clear just—

“Fuck.”

Thomas was outside before he realized he'd left the marmot there without an apology or an explanation, but the skies didn't turn this dark without help. He ran a hand over his arm and felt the armband under his jacket as he raced for the pickup. Grant wasn't there.

He'd been right when he said that the next time his frat brother caught up with them, they would deal with the kangaroo first.

He caught the edge of the tarp as the wind caught the already unsnapped section and pulled more off. Where was Grant? He looked into the bed. His staff was gone.

Of course, it was gone. He'd been wielding it the last time he'd affected the weather.

There was the flash of what he thought was lightning, but no accompanying thunder. He turned quickly enough to make out forms in the field behind the building. Three people facing one, he thought.

Thomas ran toward them. If that wasn't Grant holding off three of his brothers, then someone else had worse luck than Thomas.

The clouds thinned enough Thomas could see it was indeed Grant, but the other three looked wrong to be his frat brothers, and each one held something. One pointed the thing they held. Was that a

wand? And what was that bulbous thing at the end? Light shot out of it, and Thomas could make out the wand was transparent, and it wasn't a bulb, but a lens at the end. Grant swept his staff before him, causing the wind to pick up the snow as well as the beam of light, deflecting it away.

Thomas fought the surprise. However it was that wind could affect light, Grant was still in trouble.

A man in a suit moved to Grant's left and raised his staff, which looked to Thomas like a metal version of Grant's without as many nails in them, or any twine. A metal drum pulled out of a snowbank and launched itself at Grant. Another sweep of his staff and the kangaroo had the wind sending the barrel in another direction.

Of course, the how was obviously magic.

The third person raised his—was that a shovel, and then planted the spade into the snow. The ground heaved, sending snow in the air. The earth rolled and sent Grant stumbling back. He used his staff to remain standing.

"No!" Thomas yelled as the one, a woman, with the transparent—it had to be glass—rod swept the staff out with a beam of light. Grant fell, but didn't let go of it.

Thomas stumbled as he put his foot on a softer patch of snow, stumbled, and then realized it was the ground shifting under his feet that was making standing difficult. He stumbled forward, put his foot down, intent on continuing, but it wouldn't come up as the ground settled, and earth climbed up his foot and calf.

"You lost Grant!" the one holding the metal staff yelled into the wind. Now Thomas would make out that instead of long pieces, like Grant's wooden one, it was composed of a bunch of smaller ones, and each seemed to have one end of them painted red. "You know how far I'm willing to go. Unless you do it, that kid's going to die a slow and painful death."

The earth was up to his knee and no matter how hard Thomas pulled, he couldn't get out of it.

Then the words registered, and he stared at the standoff. How could they be after Grant? Thomas was the one being hunted.

Dumbass. Why else would someone have a pickup that warded him from being found? How could he have missed that until—

“Thomas!” Grant yelled, getting to his feet, the wind picking up again. “Get to the pickup and drive to Denver!”

“Vincent!” the metal staff holder called. “Being the kid here. Grant knows him, so I want him to see the look in his eyes as you fill his lungs with dirt.”

Thomas pulled against the ground as he was dragged toward them.

“Kinsley!” Grant yelled and slammed the end of his staff on the ground.

The man with the metal staff swore and put distance between him and Grant. The woman with the glass rod was slower to react, but she too backed away.

Instead of a lightning bolt striking the ground, a funnel of dark clouds descended on the man with the shovel planted in the ground. It hit and pulled up, dragging the man with it. He held onto the shovel’s handle, dangling in the air as the wind whipped him around. He yelled something that didn’t make it out of the funnel, then he and the shovel were going up and vanished in the air.

“Go!” Grant yelled as the earth fell off Thomas’s leg.

“You think that’s going to save the kid?” the woman mocked, raising her rod. “You didn’t even kill Vincent. Knowing you, he’s going to fall in a lake or something. How anyone thought you deserved to be given the honor of a staff is beyond me.”

“I wasn’t given anything!” Grant snarled. “I made my way!” he spun his staff before him and the wind responded. “Thomas, run! I’m going to hold them back.” Instead of moving around them, the wind now moved toward Grant with enough strength the two remaining adversaries were pulled along, even if Thomas only felt a

slight pull from it.

He hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the waiting pickup.

“Go! I’m going to be fine!” Grant yelled.

Thomas was partially turned toward his escape when the implication of what Grant said hit him. In every movie he’d watched, anytime a character told another they’d be fine, it was because they were about to make their last stand.

The only times those characters survived was when the person being told to run didn’t obey them.

Thomas wasn’t going to be the one leaving the person who’d saved him from his frat brother to die.

With a thought, he was next to the kangaroo. He really should have done that from the start. He could teleport. Why did he keep running places?

“What are you doing?” Grant Snarled as Thomas put an arm around the kangaroo. “I told you to run.”

“Don’t let them run off!” the guy with the metal staff yelled.

“That’s what I’m doing!” Thomas yelled back. “But my way.”

Oh, he really hoped this was going to work. He didn’t want to have to explain to Grant why he’d died alongside him.

Please, he pleaded to Him. Let it be because I didn’t want Yating to be hurt in the fire that he ended up in my bedroom with me, and not because his cock was in my ass. He looked around for any safe place, then his eyes burned under light the intensity of the sun. Grant yelled in pain, too.

No. No-no-no. This couldn’t be happening.

Thomas had to hang onto Grant harder as the wind picked up.

He needed to see where he was teleporting, and teleporting was the only way he could get them both to safety.

Over the wind, he heard laughter. A man laughing. It was filled with nastiness, promises of pain, and death.

Thomas had to take them away from that man, from this place, right now. They needed to be somewhere safe!

The laughter ended, as did the wind, and any other sounds.

“What?” Grant said, sounding confused.

And Thomas’s consciousness decided that now was a good time to wink out.