

Chapter One

Thomas rushed into the fast-food restaurant as soon as Grant opened the door. He considered teleporting in, but that was begging for his frat brothers to take up the chase.

The walk through the snow had started nice enough; a relaxing trek through the woods until they came across the road, then following that to the outskirts of Bozeman. It had been cold, but Thomas was from Minnesota. He knew cold.

Of course, just like the previous visits to his grandfather, he'd forgotten that Bozeman went from cold when the sun was shining to you, to, fucking cold when clouds covered to, Oh, My God, this is fucking frigid! Once the sun set. That had happened an hour ago.

"I'm never setting for in winter weather again," he stammered, willing the heat to soak into him and stop his shivering.

"So, the next part of the plan is moving to Florida?" Grant asked. "Anywhere north of that experiences winter." Thomas settled for glaring at the chuckling kangaroo. "Grab us a table while I get us coffee to go with the trail-mix."

Thomas headed for the center of the eating area. No one could pay him enough to be any closer to the windows, and leaking cold, than that at the moment. He didn't even want to look at the outside, so he sat facing the counter and watched Grant return with two large cardboard cups.

"Are we allowed to eat the food we brought?" Thomas asked as the kangaroo handed him a coffee.

Grant looked around at the nearly empty restaurant. "So long as we buy something," he raised his cup, while Thomas let his warm his hands, "and drink what passes as coffee, we are technically a customer and unless we make a nuisance of ourselves, they won't kick us out." He made a face after a sip. "Eat up. You're going to need the energy."

He let go of the cup and looked through the backpack for the trail mix. "I thought I got mine doing the horizontal mambo?"

"Oh, I'm sure there's a way you guys can make that happen," Grant replied as he stirred creamer into his coffee. "But a full belly is its own pleasure."

Thomas looked at the trail mix pack he handed to the kangaroo. "I'm going to need more than one of these to experience a full belly." He paused and smiled. "Unless you're volunteering to add to my stomach's content."

Grant looked at him. "Don't you ever get—never mind. Doesn't matter how much you coax out of me.

I'm not talented enough to fill it." He carefully opened the pack and picked a nut out of it.

Thomas ripped his open. "So, what's the plan?" He dumped the content in his mouth.

Grant continued eating. Taking a raisin and popping that in his mouth, then a small seed. Thomas stifled his sigh. This was going to be another case of not getting any—

"The Chamber showing up changes things," the kangaroo said.

Thomas looked around worriedly, then leaned in, lowering his voice. "Should you be saying their names out loud like that?"

Grant chuckled. "It's not like me saying it is going to make them appear next to us. They can't 'listen' for me saying Chamber. They'd have to set something to pick up every utterance of the word 'chamber'. Imagine this magical light going off in their face every time chamber is said by someone in the US, let alone the entire world." He took another sip of his coffee. "So long as we don't do something that'll bring the authorities down on us, the worse we have to worry about is people moving away from us weirdos."

Thomas paused, the cup to his lips. "The cops work for the Chamber?" he asked in a mix of fear and amazement.

"No. Getting arrested is never a good idea."

"Oh. Got it. So not talking about m—taking over the word in public." He sipped his coffee and made a face, too. He added sugar. He usually drank his unmolested, but this was so bitter he didn't feel like he was ruining coffee, just making whatever this was palatable. "I don't understand what having them involved changes."

"They aren't after you," Grant said after a stretching silence.

Thomas tested his 'coffee' while he waited for more, considered if he could do anything to salvage it and realized he'd given up on making it taste like anything that swill and still Grant hadn't elaborated. "And?"

The kangaroo sighed. "And it's best that I make sure they don't have a reason to notice you."

Thomas stared at him. "Grant, I grabbed you and we vanished out from under their noses. I think they've noticed me already."

"That's right," Grant said. "But they don't have a way to track you. Me, on the other hand, they have definitely found a way to pierce the wards I have set up." He paused. "I'm not safe to be around."

"But," Thomas countered, the implications of what Grant said causing him to speak hurriedly, "with me there, you can get out of whatever trap they try on you. I saved from them already. I can do it again."

"You can't keep me safe, Thomas," Grant replied calmly. "Even if you could get me to the other side of the planet, we're up against magic. They'd find me in hours, and they'd get whoever is local to capture me, and you. You can't think of the Chamber as a US organization. Or any of the factions. Magic is worldwide. You'd have to get me out of that trap and the next one, and the one after that. You getting me here left you nearly dead. Eventually, they'd clue in on that and they would take advantage of it."

"But it's not always going to be like that," Thomas protested, his fear growing. "The more I do it, the easier it's going to get, right?"

Grant shook his head. "This is magic, Thomas. There is no telling how it's going to work, at least, I can't tell you. And unlike what movies would have you believing, training while under fire only leads to you dying. I'm not going to be the reason that happens."

Thomas felt the heat of the cup, but it didn't warm him at all. "You're dumping me."

"I'm not dumping you, Thomas. And really, mellow drama? What are you, six?" Grant asked. "I am maximizing your changes of survival. You need to be safe, and that means you're going to Denver. If I'm anywhere near you, you're going to share the bullseye that's currently on my back."

Thomas sighed. The reasoning made sense, but that didn't help. "Where are you going to go?"

"I don't know. Until I've gotten my hands on specific material, there's little I can do." He sipped his cup. "I'd love to get my pickup back, but Kingsley knows how important it is to me, so he's going to expect that. I just don't know, Thomas."

"How will I get in touch with you?" Thomas asked, hoping for a different answer than what he expected.

"You don't."

"What if I need help?" Thomas asked, fighting to keep his voice from rising.

"You can't count on me," Grant replied, tone sharp. He rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. "I don't want to leave, Thomas. But right now, I am a threat to you. I'm more of one than your friends, or this Raphael. They want you alive. They seem to think that it's for your own good. If the Chamber gets their hands on you." He faltered and fear entered his expression. "Thomas, you don't want that to happen."

Thomas nodded resignedly. It wasn't like Grant was his friend, so he didn't owe him anything. But he'd been the one who'd come to his help when no one else had. He and his family were the only ones, and his family was in Minneapolis, and now, Grant would be God knew where. And really, he was no worse off than when he started.

Only it didn't feel that way. He hadn't felt this alone when his father had watched him leave on the bus.

He couldn't dwell on the past. He only had the rest of the day and tomorrow to get as much distance between himself and his frat brothers. "Once I'm in Denver, where do I go? Your friend mentioned a... Benton?"

"Denton," Grant corrected. "Denton Brislow, but they said no when I mentioned him. I just wish my phone hadn't... died before they said where you should go." He took a few nuts from the mix. "There might be another Society family in Denver, but I don't know who they'd be. Most of what I know about them is second-hand."

"Okay, so not Denton Brislow," Thomas said bitterly. "And anyone else I might go to, you don't know the name of." He rubbed his temple and fought the desire to blame the kangaroo along with the mounting headache. "I guess that leaves hanging around bathhouses, waiting until one of them reveals themselves by accidentally doing something magical."

Grant chuckled. "That's not likely to happen; accidental magic is rare. And the kind of bathhouse rich men like those in the Society might frequent wouldn't let you even look at the door."

"Then what, Grant?" Thomas demanded, throwing his hands in this air. The couple at a table by a window looked in their directions and Thomas forced his voice quieter. "What do you expect me to do? The extent of my experiences with being on the run is limited to movies, and in those, a good samaritan shows up to rescue the protagonist, and that's already happened with you. You think I can count on it happening a second time?"

Grant looked conflicted, then ran a hand over his face. "Okay, with no other information, Denton's your best bet and hopefully Jules's reasons for not liking him aren't disastrous."

"Okay." Thomas felt better with even the semblance of a plan. "Where does he live?"

The kangaroo opened his mouth, paused, then closed it. He pulled his phone, stared at the screen Thomas knew was still blank since Grant hadn't had time to look it over since it had malfunctioned.

"You're going to have to look him up when you get to Denver."

"Look him up, how?" Thomas asked in disbelief. "It's not like I have my own phone, and I can't get one, since I'm going to need what money I have left to survive until I do find him."

Grant smiled. "Why Thomas. There are those magical places where you can find all the information you'd ever want, and some you don't. Not only in the books that are there," he added, his smile turning into a grin as Thomas's expression darkened, "but by using the computers they let anyone there have access to. They are called."

"I'm a college freshman, Grant," Thomas replied. "I know what a library is. Which is why I know I need an ID to get on a computer in them."

Grant pulled a card and handed it to Thomas. "How do you think I got you in the bathhouse?"

Thomas looked at the driver's license. He frowned. It was his face, his name. The birth date was wrong, and the address claimed he lived in New Salem, North Dakota, but otherwise, this could be his license. He turned it over for an indication of the magic Grant had used to make it.

The kangaroo chuckled. "It's the magic of knowing people. You don't have to worry, it's not going to turn into a pumpkin at midnight."

Thomas stared and decided that wasn't worth asking about. "Okay, so I can find Denton Brislow, go to him and... tell him what?"

"As much as you're comfortable telling him." Grant sighed. "Look, I don't know the guy, just the stories floating around about him. They all pretty much agree that he's one of the good guys out there. That's why I mentioned him to Jules. But that they disagreed serves as a reminder they're just stories. I'd say to at least mention the Lewistons are after you, even if you won't tell him why."

"Okay." Thomas breathed in and out, unable to not think of everything that had happened since he'd ran out of Minneapolis. "What do I do if that doesn't work?"

"Thomas—" Grant started, sounding annoyed.

"No, Grant," Thomas cut him off and raised a finger. "I was supposed to take the bus to my grandfather's, just be intercepted on the way there." He raised a second one. "We were supposed to drive to Denver together, and we got intercepted." He raised a third. "We decide to ask my grandfather for his help, but the guys are already there, waiting for us." He lowered his hand. "I think I'm entitled to think I need a backup

plan at this point.”

Grant’s smile was forced. “You make a valid point. Let me think.”

While Grant did that, Thomas pulled another mix from the pack. His appetite had fled at the start of these changes in the plans, but he’d need the energy now more than ever. He even finished the swill while Grant searched his pockets and pulled a crumpled envelope from one. He wrote something inside it, sealed it, then offered it to him.

“This is you break glass in case of fire.”

Thomas stared at him. He’d heard that one before. “You’re dating yourself with that old movie reference.”

“I am not that old,” the kangaroo protested. “Those movies are good. You should try them one day.” He pulled his hand away as Thomas reach for the envelope. “This is important. Don’t open it. If all hell breaks loose, the first thing you do is head to San Francisco. Whatever else, you must be within the city limits before you open this envelope. If you cross them with the information, it contains in your head. You will lose any chance of getting help.”

Thomas nodded slowly, and when Grant offered him the envelope again, he took it as if he was handed a live bomb. He only relaxed once it was in his overcoat’s pocket.

“What I can tell you,” Grant said, “is that the instructions I wrote will take you to someone who can protect you. That help isn’t going to be free. She doesn’t do anything for free. But show her what you can do, and I promise she’ll be incentivized to keep you safe.”

“So, I’m the payment?”

Grant’s sigh was resigned. “Thomas, you need to understand something. What you can do is considered impossible. That’s almost certainly part of why your friends freaked out, and it’s definitely why this Raphael wants you. You’re breaking the laws of physics as well as magic as I understand them when you teleport. Anyone who sees you do it is going to be interested in you. Once you master how your ability works, you will be the most sought person in the world, that you want it or not. So you need to make that happen on your terms, and if nothing else, I can promise you she’s a good person to have wanting what you can offer.”

Thomas’s nod was reflexive. He barely noticed giving it as he assimilated what he’d been told. He didn’t know how he felt about being in demand to that level since all it had gotten him at this point was to be chased out of his city, away from his family by people he had believed to be his friends.

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