

Chapter One

Neil cracked an eye and immediately closed it. His phone, leaning against the lamp on his bedside table, told him he might as well get up now since his alarm was about to go off anyway, but he wasn't doing it.

He wished he could tell the coach to go fuck himself. He'd spent last night studying hard for his coming history exam, and he was entitled to sleep in and now worry about football training for one—

The door slapped open. "Up and about!" a man yelled.

"Fuck," Neil complained. His alarm hadn't even—his alarm went off at the same time as Coach Horgar flicked the light on.

"Time's a-wasting," the bear called. Then the door to another room was being violently opened and Niel sat.

On the other side of the room, a cougar with bleary, barely opened eyes looked back at him. "If I go back to sleep, will you tell him I died in the night?"

"If you aren't at practice," Niel replied, "I'm not going to have to tell him anything. He's going to come here and kill you himself."

The cougar groaned. "And he's going to make me suffer for bothering him." He got out of bed. "Dibs on the bathroom."

Niel nodded. He needed the two minutes that gave him to finish waking up himself.

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"Come on!" the bear yelled. "What is this, summer camp? You aren't in high school anymore. How are you going to be picked by the NFL if this is the kind of energy you put in training?"

Niel grunted as the lion impacted against him, but didn't move.

"I haven't been in high school for years," the senior grumbled as he kept pushing, trying to force Niel to yield. "And how the fuck am I going to play for the NFL when you spend your time trying to kill me?" He looked at Niel and grinned. "Aren't you happy you decided to join us, coon?"

Niel twisted, giving the impression the lion had unbalanced him, then placed a foot in the lion's

path as he tried to bolt and ended up face-first in the grass. Too bad for him, shoulder pads were all the coach had them wear for this.

“Coon’s derogatory,” Niel told the lion as he spat out grass.

“Leslie, that’s a foul!” the coach yelled. “Next time I don’t want to be able to tell you tripped him. Chunho, how come he was able to trip you? Weren’t you paying attention? You’re the Senior, he’s the Freshman, you should have him eating grass, not the other way around. Go again!”

“Yes, Coach,” the lion replied as Niel took position again. “You’re not going to get a second time, coon.” The lion grinned.

The raccoon grinned back, “I’ll just have to think of something else, like bringing a razor and shaving that oh so pretty mane of yours.”

“You wouldn’t dare, Niel.”

Niel grinned. “Call me coon one more time and find out.”

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“Alright,” the coach called to the undressing players. “That wasn’t exactly horrible. Maybe some of you have a chance at doing this pro, but don’t hold your breath if this is all you’re going to bring to the game.”

“Come on!” someone whined. “We have exams, give us a break.”

“Herley, if that’s the attitude you have, I want you outside and give me four laps around the field. Now, Herley!” Cursing, the hedgehog threw a jacket on and ran out of the locker room to the snickers of players. “Oh? Am I hearing volunteers to run by his side?” Silence fell. “I thought so.” The bear glared at everyone there before turning and walking out.

Activities resumed and Niel enjoyed the show.

“People are going to get ideas the way you’re looking at the naked guys,” the lion said.

“So long as it’s that I enjoy what I’m seeing, they can get all the ideas they like.”

“Hey, Leslie!” a cheetah called from the other before gyrating his hips and causing his cock to bounce.

“Call me with your girlfriend dumps you, Sampson, not before.”

“One of these days,” the wolf next to the cheetah said, “someone’s going to object to you leering at them.”

Niel rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t leering.” He looked the wolf up slowly and licked his lips. “This is leering,” he said as the wolf’s ears went back and he covered the growing erection with a towel.

The lion shook his head. “I don’t think I’ve ever known a guy so openly comfortable with his sexuality.”

Niel shrugged. “What’s the point with having a problem being who you are?” especially when he remembered always being comfortable with it, on top of remembering not knowing if he even cared about girls or guys. Having some crazy guy screw with his memories just because he wanted the guys on the team to be playmates for Roland had been weird, not to say of the rest of the stuff Niel had learned about in the process of getting his original memories back, but it had accelerated his sexual awakening.

Niel turned to put grab his shower kit and in the mirror in the door he caught the wolf looking him up. Niel smiled as they locked eyes, and the wolf nodded toward the shower before heading there.

The raccoon smiled at the lion, who rolled his eyes, and headed to join the wolf. Was he going to top or bottom this time? It wasn’t like Niel was picky, so long as it was fun.

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“You coming to the club on Friday?” the lion asked once they were done dressing.

“Got plans,” Niel replied.

“Oh, got yourself a guy to get laid with?”

“Guys, plural. I’m going to the Sigma Theta Gamma party.”

“Fuck, really? Are they as intense as the stories say?”

“Why?” Niel grinned. “Curious to experience one of them?”

“Come on, you heard the rumors. They’re some sort of mafia safe house they were even raided a couple of years ago.”

Niel fought to not react. He was lucky not to have been at the frat on that day, but he’d been there the day before, he and half the high school football team, to celebrate a victory. The coach had fucked each of them, as was the ‘tradition’.

He’d heard of the assault, and things had been explained afterward, once he had his memories restored. There had also been the stereotypical cover-up. The one that every movie dealing with the supernatural existing with reality claimed needed to be there so people wouldn’t go insane. It had kept the incident from making the news, but stories had circulated, and as far as Niel was concerned, the truth would have been easier to explain.

“Really, a bunch of international students in a frat equates the mob?” He forced a chuckle.

“Don’t you find it weird they’re all gay?”

“No.” After all, there was a god of gay men. “They have money. They’re not going to settle for a frat where they have to worry what the guy in the next room thinks of them banging one in their room.” Or on the kitchen table, at the couch, or the shower, or the... Maybe Niel had spent too much time there while under that bat’s control, but it had been where Roland had been a lot of the time. And the bat had their friendship a lot tighter than it had been before.

“Still, you be careful there.”

Niel grinned. “I will be.” His phone buzzed, and he took it out. Chi-con’s Eatery was calling him. “I have to take this.” Niel hurried out of the locker, then answered.

“It’s almost here!” the caller exclaimed. (the time frame for Roland’s birthday is a tad nebulous because of changes that happened in the writing of book 1. We can still adjust things in that book if needed. I wrote this chapter with it taking place around mid-terms, because that was mentioned as a comment in the outline. Peeking ahead, there’s something with Halloween, so I don’t think mid-term will work. I think the initial plan was for this to take place close to the start of the year. It’s easy enough to adjust that way too. Regardless of how far or close Roland’s birthday is, I see him having the same level of excitement at finally reaching his ceremony of dominance.)

“Hey Rol,” Niel answered, chuckling.

“I so can’t wait to be eighteen.”

“You just want the superpower that comes with it.”

“Wouldn’t you want that? Maybe I’ll be like Thomas, or better yet, you need to meet Juam, the things he can make you feel with just a touch, and he isn’t getting in your mind, you aren’t imagining it, he can actually get you to—”

“Should you be talking about that over the phone?”

“How else am I going to tell you about that since you aren’t here?”

“Yeah, but you know who could be listening in.”

“Nah, they had that magic chick do something to the phone I mailed you that makes it impossible for that rat to trace the call. We’re fine.”

“And you aren’t worried about calling the person who can make it so that your call magically originates from a Vietnamese restaurant in downtown Minneapolis, the ‘magic chick’?”

“Why would she be listening to my call? It’s not like I’m anyone important. I’m not Thomas or anything.”

Niel shook his head. His best friend had lost a lot of the serious brooding attitude when he’d accepted he wanted his brother carnally, but he’d also gained a level of *laissez-faire* that worried Niel at times. It was like being magic was the answer to all the problems he could have.

That or being rich, well living among rich people.

“What are you doing to prepare?”

“It’s more me who’s being done. They know I’m about to turn top and they are making sure to squeeze in all the time with me they can.”

“Aren’t they worried you’re going to make them pay for all that?”

“Worried? They’re fucking hoping I will. You have looked at the video I sent you, right? I’ve grown over the last two years.”

“Oh yeah, you have.”

“How about you? How did you celebrate your eighteenth birthday?”

“I haven’t yet.”

“What? How come? It was over a month ago. If I’d known you weren’t going to do anything, I would have had Thomas take me to your place.”

“Oh yeah, like you and him appearing in my bedroom would have gone over so well with my dad. He doesn’t much, remember? (actually, I can’t recall if we ever establish what Steward knows about what happened to Niel and the football team, so if what I’m putting doesn’t work, feel free to change it) there was a sex drug dumped in the team’s water cooler and we went at it for like a week. He doesn’t know about the, you know what.”

“Magic. It’s not a curse word or anything.”

“Well, I’m standing in the middle of Mundania, so it’s not a word I can say without care. Anyway, I didn’t celebrate turning eighteen then because I already had plans to celebrate it this Friday, at Sigma Theta Gamma.”

“Oh, you are going to have so much fun. Blow Olavo for me.”

“Which one is he?”

“The capybara; dresses well, great cock, and knows what to do with it.”

“All the guys in that frat know what to do with theirs.”

“Oh? You’ve already tried some of them?”

Niel laughed. “I have been at Uni since late August. Gilbert found me and made sure I was still okay. We met up a few times after that, then there’s this fox from China.”

“Okay, so you haven’t been celibate.”

“Me, Celibate? I might not need the sex the way you do, but I definitely make sure I get some.”

“Make sure you save some for when you’re at my birthday celebration.”

Niel snorted. “That isn’t going to be a problem. Since by then all you will really need is my ass, right?”

“Come on Niel. You aren’t like other boys. You, I’ll take in his entirety even after my ceremony.”

Chapter Two

Niel had his ID out before the jackal in the suit, just inside the door, asked for it. “Razeen, right?”

The jackal looked at the ID. “Niel Leslie.” He seemed to think. “I am sorry, have we met?”

“This might help.” Neil grabbed the jackal’s head with a hand and kissed him. The other hand made its way into the pants and stroked the already hard cock.

Someone cleared his throat and Niel twisted his head only enough to see the margay with the tilted ear looking at him and not break the kiss. “The Freshman isn’t supposed to be getting any while accomplishing his door duties,” Kuno said.

Niel pulled his wet hand from the pants and broke the kiss.

“I still do not know who you are,” Razeen said, “but I look forward to making your acquaintance.”

“I look forward to feeling that in me again,” the raccoon replied, then stepped to the margay, offering him his wet palm. “I got the ink.”

Kuno rolled his eyes and lowered his voice. “You know you aren’t supposed to be that obvious about it, right?” He lowered Niel’s hand and raised the other, taking the brush out of the bowl with the black liquid.

“Your house, your rules.” Niel licked the cum off his hand; he wasn’t letting it go to waste. “I figure everyone knows what goes in the ink, if not why.”

“Is there anything about us those two haven’t told you?” Kuno asked as he traced symbols on the inside of Niel’s wrist.

“That isn’t them. The bat wasn’t exactly secret about what he could do. And I didn’t forget any of that, when my true memories were restored.”

The margay nodded. He’d been under the influence of the bat longer, and while they hadn’t talked about that in details, Niel figured the margay had had a lot more to straighten up.

“Go in,” Kuno said, placing the brush back in the bowl.

“What, I don’t get a kiss?”

“Like you need that to get turned on.” The margay cupped Niel’s crotch and stroked the raccoon’s hard cock through the fabric. “Didn’t think so.” He grinned. “Things are more or less the same as it was for the Freshman party, or when you visited before that. If you want to make sure not to lose, or end up with someone else’s, clothes when you leave, you know where my bedroom is. If you can make it before they get pulled off you, you’re welcome to stash them there.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” He slapped the margay’s ass as he passed and entered the frat proper.

Four townhouses converted into one made for a lot of space, enough for more than a dozen guys to live comfortably, although, after the bat, Niel had been told they weren’t letting more than ten live here at a time. They didn’t want a repeat of Roland’s brother. It also made for large rooms where a lot of guys could party, with or without clothes on. For as sexual as the frat’s reputation was, not everything was about sex with them. Or rather, not immediately about sex, he reminded himself as he passed the poker room where the only one still fully dressed was a capybara. The six others were in various states of undress, with many of the watchers more preoccupied with pleasuring the guy next to them or using them to pleasure themselves.

“Niel,” someone shrieked, and before the raccoon could prepare himself, the monkey was on him, and they were on their back in a room with a large screen and sounds of explosions. “I am so glad you came.” Limbani had Niel’s pants undone and around his ankles.

“Not yet,” Niel replied, then moaned in appreciation as the monkey’s lips closed around his cock. He ignored whatever else was taking place in the room and placed a hand on Limbani’s head to control some of the blow job. Fuck, the monkey was good.

Under a handful of minutes, Niel tensed and grunted, thrusting in the monkey’s muzzle before unloading his balls. He sighed and opened his eyes to a few guys watching them instead of the money playing. One was stroking himself while the others hadn’t moved to it, but had noticeable tents.

“Tasty,” the monkey said, licking his lips and smiling at Niel.

“I think they could use your help,” he replied.

Limbani was on the exposed cock before anyone could react, and Niel used the distraction to grab his pants and leave the room. In short order, the monkey would have everyone there forget about the movie.

“Limbani?” a silver fox asked as Niel crossed his path. He had a beautiful Chinese accent.

“He’s busy,” Niel replied and pushed the fox against the wall.

“Limbani has charged me with keeping him from disrupting the clothes-on rooms,” the fox replied.

“Peng,” Niel said. “In this place, there is no such thing, you should know that.” Niel kissed the reply out of the naked fox before turning him around and whispering. “Only not yet to be naked rooms.” He ground his cock until it slipped between the cheeks.

“Niel,” Peng sighed as the cock slipped inside him. “I have been assigned a duty.”

“Doesn’t your god dictate you have to pleasure guys?” Niel whispered before thrusting. “And doesn’t what he wants take precedence?”

“You are,” the fox moaned in response to the raccoon’s forceful thrust. “Twisting is decree.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m not.” Niel reached around and wrapped his hand around the cock. “Now,

stop talking and just moan.”

Peng obeyed, and Niel fucked him hard.

The fox came first. Painting the wall with cum, then Niel.

“I knew you had a nice ass,” Niel whispered before nipping at the fox’s neck.

“I will have to fuck you again,” Peng replied.

“Oh, you are more than welcome to it, but if you want to accomplish your duties to Olavo, the monkey’s in the movie room, have fun trying to pull him away from all the guys in there.” He pulled out of the fox. Who said something in Chinese that included Olavo’s name.

A curse, Niel thought. He picked up his pants again and continued for the stairs.

“You have beautiful fur,” a soft but deep voice said behind him in a thick Russian accent that sent a shiver down Niel’s spine. Did he have something for accents? He was definitely going to have to check that out. He turned.

The man before him was large, thick, with sandy fur and blue eyes. The fur was so long that only a little of the cock was jutting out.

“I think you were going for “you’ve got a purdy mouth,” Niel replied, licking his lips.

The pallas cat shook his head. “I not see lips until now. Fur is what I notice. Very nice.” He ran a hand through Niel’s fur. “Soft.”

Since he didn’t want the guy to feel left out, Niel ran a hand through his fur and his fingers sank in deep before touching muscle, and there were muscles there. Not as hard as his or any of the guy under Coach Horgar’s tutelage, but definite muscles. Niel pressed and the pallas cat shivered.

“Good fingers,” the cat said softly.

“I’m Niel.”

“Fedor,” the cat replied.

“I love how thick your fur is. You’re naked, you’re hard. Do you want to fuck me, or for me to fuck you?”

“Forward,” Fedor replied with a smile.

“This is Sigma Theta Gamma. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t interested in having sex.”

Fedor nodded. “Sad I miss Freshman party. I don’t miss this one.”

Niel looked him over. “I’m glad you’re here. So how about it?”

“I will fuck you,” the pallas cat said. “You are just done with fox. You need time to get ready again.”

“Look down,” Niel said. “I’m good to go.”

“I fuck you anyway,” Fedor replied, unbothered. “You can fuck me after.”

Niel tried the closest door, and it opened to a sitting room with guys lying around on the floor and couches. He pulled the cat in and found a space on the floor large enough to accommodate them. Niel went on his back and wrapped his legs around the pallas cat’s hips, chuckling when they sunk into the fur until they almost vanished.

“I will be gentle.”

Niel rolled his eyes. “I’m not a virgin; fuck me as hard as you feel you need to. If it’s too much for me, I’ll let you know.”

Fedor smiled, positioned himself, and pushed into the raccoon, pulling out almost as soon as he

bottomed out and was back in. In no time the cat was fucking Niel hard enough they were pushed against another couple, the collie on his back and bouncing up and down on his crotch.

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The pallas cat gave way to a bear, then Niel fucked his team's quarterback. Then he was fucking Fedor again, then Limbani, while Olavo fucked him. Later, he found the capybara and sucked him off, making sure to tell him it was from Roland, which amused Olavo. There was an attempt at eating food, but he ended up eating out a squirrel instead, then being fed cum from three guys who were in a contest as to who could outlast the others.

There was the set of twins, Siamese cats, who got off as much on watching him fuck the other as they did fucking one another. There was the elephant, so hung he might compete with Chima, at least in his memory. Niel hadn't had a chance to see the hyena since the time they had both been under the bat's influence.

He joined the conga line of guys as they fucked guys bent over a series of couches, and he figured he might be the only one to finish the entire line. Then there were the bedrooms with guys half-sleeping but not one of whom protested as Niel fucked one, then the other.

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Niel stepped into the kitchen and eight guys looked at him, surprised.

"You guys left me anything, or do I have to suck breakfast out of you?" Niel asked, looking over the remnant of dishes on the table.

"You are still awake?" Olavo asked.

"Did you sleep at some point?" Kuno followed with.

The two of them looked at Neil in concern, while the seven others seemed more amused.

"I don't think so." He tapped his wrist. "You guys made sure I'd keep up." He found a plate with meat that had cooled do almost cold, but he was too hungry to care. He shoved some in his mouth over Gagan's protests. Then the elephant looked at him as he was an idiot as Niel lunged for a glass of milk and downed that.

"I tried to warn you it might be too spicy for you," Gagan said.

"That stopped working for most a few hours in the night," Olavo said.

Niel shrugged. "Fedor is still going at it. He was fucking Limbani as I came here."

"Who?" the capybara asked.

"Pallas cat," a stoat answered, "He's doing a Masters in one of the Ecom categories. I'd have thought you'd know him, Ol."

"I finished my masters in macroeconomics last year. Although there was no pallas cat in then either."

"He transferred in this year."

"You aren't in Ecom, Tayang," Peng pointed out. "How do you know so much about him?"

"Pottery," the stoat replied and only smiled as the others tried to get more out of him.

"Niel," Kuno whispered. "Are you sure you're okay? You aren't tired or sore or..."

The raccoon laughed. "Of course I'm sore. This is my birthday celebration. If I hadn't ended up sore, Roland would have Thomas teleport him here and make sure I was. Come on guys, I am fine."

"Niel Leslie," Olavo said, tone serious. "You know why we're concerned."

Niel rolled his eyes, but before he responded, the rabbit exclaimed. “You aren’t a Luther?”
“Niel Leslie.” The raccoon offered his hand. “I guess names didn’t come up while you were fucking me.

“Erwin Noble.” They shook hands. “So you’re a friend of the Society? I mean these two a tad free with what they’re saying around you for anything else.”

“You didn’t tell them?” Niel asked.

“That is not exactly something we talk about,” Olavo said.

“Wait,” a bison said. “Is that about what happened here two years ago? My dad said the Lewistons tried to take over the city.”

“No, they didn’t,” Kuno replied.

“They had a Stroker living here,” the rabbit said and was stared at.

“Look,” Niel said, since he had no interest in watching drama. “There was a thing. Mind control was involved, after a fashion. I was one of those who got pulled in. My mind was fixed, but I still remember everything, especially the sex. I would have been pissed if I’d forgotten the sex I’ve had here in that time. If that makes me a friend of the Society, cool. If it doesn’t, I’m still in the know considering my best friend is part of your now.”

“The teleporter!” the bison, Bart, Niel finally remembered, exclaimed. “There’s been rumors some family had one, and that they broke away.”

Olavo groaned and rubbed his face.

“Yeah,” Niel said. “His brother’s my best fuck buddy in the world.”

Olavo glared at Niel. “This is not something that is to be discussed.”

The raccoon shrugged. “Okay, I won’t talk about it anymore.”

“No, now that the damage is done,” Kuno said. “You won’t talk about it, leaving us with explaining things.”

“If you’re lucky, maybe I start breathing fire because of you guys,” Niel grinned. “Maybe I’ll find out I’m able to stop time, then you’re going to have fun trying to keep me from running off. I won’t,” he said at the scared expression on Olavo’s face. “Come on. If something like that happens, I’ll come see you guys. Not that it can, since there aren’t thirteen of you here.” Niel looked at them with butterflies starting to fly in his stomach. “Right?”

Kuno shook his head. “Ten in the frat, there’s a representative from the Ogdens in the city, but if one of them had even come close to the university, I’d have been informed.”

“I don’t think the frat will ever shake off the reputation of things happening here,” Olavo said.

“Did more stuff happen here?” Niel asked.

The capybara shook his head. “But once is all it takes.”

Chapter Three

Niel listened to the silence as the word processor's editor went over his essay again. The silence wasn't absolute, students typed their essays at other tables, phones were moved from one side of a table to another as people shared some pictures, or files, or something else, whatever it was, it had the group giggling almost soundlessly. And there was the sound of books being opened and closed and pages being turned. Even well in the middle of the twenty-first century, paper books were still a thing.

But every sound was muffled, even that happening at the table next to his. As if simply by being in a library, sound was careful not to be noticed, not to distract from more important things taking place in the silence. It was a comfort compared to the yelling and rejoicing talking of the locker room, or even his roommate singing and dancing to the oldies in their room.

The screen flashed green and a zero error appeared.

"Finally," Niel whispered and felt the side-eye the woman at the other table gave him. He enjoyed the silence, but he hadn't been interested in spending all afternoon fixing the essay. Getting his facts straight was problematic enough, but Professor Armstrong was known to penalize grammar errors. He uploaded the file to the Professor's student-drive and stretched.

A glance at the clock showed he had four hours before training started, so three hours before he had to be there. They had a game tomorrow, and the coach was hard on anyone who didn't show up early since he took it as a lack of drive toward winning.

Only losers showed up on time, he loved to yell at anyone not at least half an hour early. Niel pull his phone from the slot, stood, and stretched. He made a show of it and watch who was paying attention. Plenty of women, some with dreamy expressions, other with outright lust. He left down to the others on the team. A few of the men watched him with interest, two with outright lust, and one looked away as soon as Niel locked eyes with him, ears folding back. Too far to be sure, but shyness was cute.

He headed for the ram and was intently looking at the screen on his phone, although his ears were turned in his direction. Niel sat next to him, put a hand on his thigh, and leaned close.

“What are you watching?” he whispered. On the screen, the camera followed a football as it flew across a playing field to be caught by Fielding, who jumped in front of the opposing player, landed, and ran in the opposing direction. Niel made a quick appearance in the background as he’d been running to intercept the long pass too, but the buffalo had beaten him to it. He’d been tacked fifteen yards later, but their team had gained the play.

“You a fan?” Niel asked softly, moving his hand on the thigh up.

The ram swallowed, then stammered. “Yes.” And immediately blushed. Niel couldn’t tell if it was from the admission, his hand brushing the stiffening cock under the fabric or the shushing that answered him.

“Do you want me to stop?”

The ram swallowed again, this time shaking his head instead of risking speaking. Niel cupped the crotch and cock fully.

The ram bit his lips to silence the whimper and Niel pulled away, which almost elicited another whimper. Niel leaned in closer to the ram’s crimson ear. “Do you want to explore Ancient Roman history with me?”

The ram shook himself and looked at Niel in confusion. It wasn’t a known fact outside history students, or anyone interested in a quiet spot in the library, that the Ancient Rome section was the furthest back, and that all those bookshelves meant that someone had to try hard for sounds to reach the first row of tables.

The guys at Sigma Theta Gamma were well acquainted with that section, even if not one of them cared for history.

The ram hesitated, then nodded. Niel considered actually taking out a book once they were there, just to mess with him, but the raccoon needed this too.

“Are we allowed to do this?” the ram asked as Niel ran his hand over his chest and undid buttons.

“No one cares about Ancient Rome unless it’s about their sexual practices. I’m Niel.”

“Leslie,” the ram replied. “Number twenty-nine, I know. Luke, Luke Watson.”

“So you are a fan.” Niel grinned. He had his hands in the woolly fur. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Luke. You don’t have to let me do all the work, unless that’s what you like.”

Luke shook his head vigorously. “I’ve just never...”

Niel froze. “Never had sex?” it was too late to just walk away if that was the case, but this wasn’t the right place for someone’s first time.

“No, I’ve had sex before, just never with a football player, or any guy from a sports team. I’m not exactly...”

Niel looked at the ram. He was on the thin side, and there was something dorky about the shyness, but he looked good. Niel didn’t consider himself as having a type; sure, he liked muscular guys, but he didn’t need them to be that way for him to want to have sex. Really, clear interest from the other guy was often enough for Niel to decide to go for it.

“Well, you shouldn’t think that way. Go after what you want.” Niel smiled as he recalled a story. “But ask permission before kissing a quarterback.” Then he kissed the ram, his hand moving lower until he encountered the waistband. By the time they were at the back of the ram, undoing the tail strap, the ram was kissing him hard, and grinding. Squeezing the exposed ass made Luke squeal.

Niel broke the kiss while the ram until his own tail strap. “Do you mind bottoming? I really could go with a hot and tight tunnel around my cock.”

Luke pushed Niel’s pants down and his hands were back in front, stroking the raccoon’s cock. “I prefer it actually.”

Niel smiled. “Then get out of those pants and I will show you an advantage to football players.” He pulled the packet of lube and the ram had stepped out of his pants when he straightened. Niel kissed him again as he reached back with a finger and lubed the ram. Then he stroked the cocks together, lubing himself up.

“Ready?” Niel asked, and before Luke could respond, he had both hands on the ram’s ass and hiked him up. The reflexive surprise had Luke’s legs around the raccoon’s hips and Niel lowered him until his cock was between the ass cheeks. “Upper-body strength for the win.”

After a little adjusting, he was under the tail and paused. “You ready?” he asked.

“Fuck yeah,” Luke responded.

Niel pushed in and moaned. Luke groaned. Once he bottomed in, Niel paused to catch his breath, then pulled out and pushed back in.

“Fuck,” Luke whispered.

Niel agreed and picked up speed. Fuck, he needed this.

Luke’s hand was between them and the ram moaned as he stroked himself. The ass tightened and relaxed around Niel’s cock, then he was kissed the ram hard to muzzle his orgasmic scream.

As he panted and caught his breath, Luke tensed and then was grunting in the kiss and cumming in their fur.

“Fuck,” Luke breathed.

“Yeah,” Niel replied, grinning. “Am I living up to your expectation?” The ram nodded.

Niel was still hard, so he looked around for a clock. There should be enough time, he decided, even if he couldn’t see one. “Do you want to go again?”

“Really?” Luke asked.

“I’m kind of pent-up today,” Niel replied.

“Fuck yeah.”

* * * * *

Not today, Niel thought as he ran at the runner. The cheetah did a sudden zag to the zig he’d been feinting, but Niel punched and they went down.

“Good intercept, Leslie,” Coach Horgar said in his ear. Niel stood and helped the opposing player up, then they were talking position for the next play. “They’re going to go for a pass,” the coach said, “so be ready. Leslie, Fielding, Matterson, do not let it be caught. I don’t care if the ball ends up on the ground, so long as it isn’t in their hands. With thirty yards to go, it’s going to be too easy for them to make the point.”

The ball was in play, but instead of throwing it, it was passed to someone. Niel laid eyes on number twenty-eight, arm tucked against himself as he maneuvered around the line and ran for him.

“Sixteen’s got the ball,” someone said. Niel couldn’t see sixteen, so he kept on twenty-eight until.

“Yes!” Coach Horgar exclaimed, then the signal the play was over. On the other side, there was a pile-up. Number twenty-eight spread his arms to show he wasn’t holding anything and Niel gave him a

good-natured middle finger.

He looked at the board. Five minutes until half-time and the score was sixteen to fifteen for them. The coach was going to chew them out if they couldn't get at least one touchdown in that time to widen the lead. Fortunately, that wasn't his role, not that he'd be spared the chewing if they couldn't manage it.

* * * * *

Niel shoved the civet against the back of the shower and kissed him. He moaned as the cocks rubbed together between the guy's hands. Niel would prefer an ass right now, but he didn't have the time for more than quick relief. If the coach walked into the showers and figured out the raccoon had sneaked in a fan, let alone was about to cum on him... being shaved was probably likely.

The civet grunted and came. Then it was Niel's turn. He forced himself to focus on the sounds outside his stall. Showering was still happening.

The civet opened his muzzle, but Niel silenced him and moved to his ear. "You're not supposed to be here, remember. If the coach finds out, it's both our hides that will get tanned. I'm going to finish showering, then you're going to wait here for me, okay? We'll have more fun afterward."

The grin the civet gave him was all the answer Niel needed.

* * * * *

"Great game!" the bear exclaimed as he entered the locker room. Niel pulled the towel off his head. "I think that it's possible some of you have what it takes to make the NFL after all. But don't let this victory get your heads, it's not winning that makes a winner, it's constantly winning."

"Coach that—"

"Yes, Herley?" the bear interrupted the hedgehog, grinning.

"Nothing, Coach."

"That's what I thought. Now, as you all know, November is coming."

"Here we go," the lion sitting on the bench next to Niel sighed.

"So you have a few days to get it out of your system, and I mean you too, Freshmen."

"Sir," Herley said, cautiously, "what exactly are you talking about?"

"I am so glad you asked, Herley," the bear said. "Will one of you more experience men enlighten him?"

"No Nut November," Burkle said, grinning and rubbing his hands in anticipation.

"Okay," the hedgehog said, looking around, confused.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Coach Horgar said, his grin so wide Niel expected the top of his head to fall off. "Did you think only certain men in the team take part? What kind of teammate are you that you'll let others go through that alone?"

"You're joking?" someone exclaimed.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" the bear replied, still grinning.

"Yeah," that same someone said, "well I'm not doing it. I have a girlfriend and she has needs."

"I am certain she'll be happy to join in your sacrifice for the cause that is team unity," the bear said. He was having way too much fun, Niel decided. The lion looked in pain and Niel understood him. How could anyone go a month without just jerking off, let alone not having sex? How would the coach even enforce it?

“You don’t know her,” was the reply. “Look, I appreciate it means something to some of you, but you can’t force the rest of us to join in.”

“I can’t?” the sheer strength of the surprise in the coach’s voice made Niel wary. “Wait, you right, I can’t. Well, fuck me. Like, how ever will anyone make sure that this team is unified in their belief that if one has to sacrifice, you all will?”

Niel looked around as the seniors looked back at them, predatory expressions on their faces. They couldn’t be serious. Niel looked at the lion who, while resigned, nodded. He searched and found the cougar on the other side of the room and the fear on his roommate’s face told him he wouldn’t find any help there.

Okay, there was no point in panicking. Even if they perfectly coordinated, there was no way the seniors could keep an eye on every Freshman on the team, right? Niel would be able to sneak away here and there and hook up with someone. Fuck, he had a frat full of guys who would be happy to protect him from the team for the sanctity of being able to fuck.

Niel forced the worries down. He’d be fine. He’d tell them he was abstaining, and they’d have to believe him.

Chapter Four

The ghoul ran out the door screaming, liquid sloshing out of the solo cup, and Niel stepped aside.

“I thought you said this was a legal party,” Brenden said.

“It’s what I was told.”

“So that wasn’t alcohol in that cup?” the cougar asked.

“Ont if they want this to be legal,” Niel replied. “Look, you don’t have to come. This isn’t going to be your crowd.”

“Music,” the cougar said, raising a finger. “Costumes,” a second finger, “and dancing. Definitely my kind of party.”

“And guys hitting on you.” Niel stepped through the door and was nearly bowled over by someone dressed as a . . . robot? At least there was enough foil on them to be one.

“Looking like this?” Brenden asked, motioning to the black dress, the loose bracelets, and clip-on earrings, then shaking his head for the head fur extensions to dance. “In this crowd, women are going to be all over me.”

“And who are you again?” Niel asked and dodged the slap.

“Do not act like I’ve never shown you a picture of Tina Turner. The diva of the millennia. I swear I am going to put her discography on repeat for the rest of the year on your phone if you do.”

“Hey, I’d never do that.” On top of Brenden being one of the quarterbacks for the team, he was aiming for a master in information technology and was already a pretty good slicer, so threats against Niel’s phone were to be taken seriously.

“Anyway, at least I put work on my costume. What are you supposed to be again?”

“A pirate,” Niel replied. He’d come across the cheap tricorn hat on the trip with his dad to refresh their winter wardrobe, and he’d gotten the idea for the costume. A cheap plastic sword had been easy to find, then Stewart had offered an old vest he didn’t mind his son ruining. His father had been surprisingly lax when he’d found out Niel was gay and already sexually active when the whole

‘spiked water with sex drug’ thing had been revealed. He’d made Niel promise to be safe in the partner he chose and to tell him if any of them treated him badly and then just smiled and let him loose on the world.

Stewart knew exactly what Niel’s plan was for this party, hence him handing over a vest he didn’t mind having ruined.

Niel leaned close to the ear of his roommate and whispered. “I’m a butt pirate.”

Brenden groaned, then they were inside party central.

The Halloween party for underage guys and girls had been advertised at the Eagle Club since the end of September. Niel hadn’t planned on going, since gay clubs weren’t his thing. But if this was the last night he could have sex without having to worry about one of his teammates making a big deal of it, he’d decided he was going to have a real celebration.

The music was loud, the lighting garish, and the costumes went from amazing to ridicule to, in one case, non-existent. No, two cases. Unless the exposed breasts on one and cock on the other were the costume. Niel decided not to go check.

He got to the bar and paid for a solo cup of juice for him and Brenden, then he walked around the dance floor, mixing it in with the guys on it.

* * * * *

Niel kissed the jaguar in the black and white dyed fur as they slowly ground their crotch together. Both were shirtless, which revealed to Niel the guy had gone to the extent of doing at least his torso in the same black-and-white pattern. Something out of an old tv show. Niel hadn’t cared. All he was interested in now was finding out if he’d down his entire body that way, and how much rubbing together it would take for the dye to transfer to the raccoon’s fur.

The jaguar broke the kiss and pulled Niel off the dance floor and into one of the unoccupied booths. Then kissed him again while reaching into Niel’s pants with a hand. The raccoon smiled in the kiss and thrust in the hand. He was really happy he’d gone for a loser pair. He had his hand behind the jaguar and undid the tail strap before pushing his hand down and squeezing the ass.

He broke the kiss and leaned close to the black ear. “Do you think we’re going to get in trouble if I fuck you right here?” he had to raise his voice even this close to be heard.

The Jaguar pulled away in surprise. “Have you never come here before?” he replied. Niel shook his head, and the jaguar grinned. “The owner’s something of a perv. So long as you don’t mind the risk there’s a camera looking in our directions, for *safety* reasons, while you fuck me. No one will complain.”

They weren’t breaking the law, and Niel wouldn’t mind seeing his performance if someone brought up a recording in the process of trying to shame him or such a thing. He started pulling the jaguar’s pants down, grinning. He had them to his knees and yes, the jaguar had dyed his fur black and white everywhere, when someone called.

“Niel Leslie?”

“Yeah,” he replied, turning to see who it was. The only reason he could think was that Brenden had gotten into trouble and had gotten someone to get Niel. He didn’t get to see who it was as a bag fell over his head, plunging him into darkness. Then hands pulled him out.

“Sorry, buddy,” a different voice said. “But this guy’s late for his curfew.”

What? “Let go of me!” He fought to get free, and a hand lost grip but was replaced by a

surprisingly strong bear-hug. Niel wasn't weak. Years of training as part of playing football had given him real muscles, but whoever held of him had more.

"Stop fighting," someone said, "it's only going to make things harder on you."

"Are you fucking serious?" Niel yelled as he recognized the voice. "It's not November yet!" He considered making even more of a scene than they had to be making, but if no one had intervened, it mean his teammates had talked with the club's bouncers. He sighed and let go. He might as well let them do their little hazing ceremony for the start of No Nut November, and he'd try to find the jaguar again so they could finish this.

* * * * *

Niel was put in a chair, and before he realized it was tied to it, then his pants were pulled off. "Really?" he demanded. "You guys don't get enough of my cock in the locker room, you need to look at it again?" He frowned, in the bag created darkness, at the lack of chuckling.

The bag was unceremoniously pulled off his head, and he blinked at the harsh light, then looked around. He was one of twenty guys seated on chairs, tied and with their pants, as well as underwear, missing. The bank of light above them created a bubble, outside of which was pure darkness.

"We are so glad you could join us on this momentous occasion," a deep voice said.

"What the fuck?" one of the guys in the chair said. "Murray, is that you? You guys know hazings are illegal, right? I swear, my dad's going to sue your family so fucking hard for this."

"This isn't a hazing." Something jingled as someone walked. "It is a show of support. You heard the coach, we are all in this together." Men walked into the light from behind, then in front. They were shirtless but wore pants. As if they were making a point of the freshmen's pantlessness.

"Does that mean you're wearing one of those too?" the hedgehog said, nodding to the box Sampson held, the one where the jingling came from.

Jingling, metal, wearing no pants. Niel wasn't the second to realize what was in the box, but his groan came soon after.

"Now, why would *we* need them?" Ackroyd said, grinning. "We weren't the ones showing a lack of team spirit when the coach announced it, were we?"

"Nope, we are doing this full bore of our own volition," Markham replied.

"Sure, you guys are going to abstain," Brenden said. "The only person on the team hornier than you, Markham, is Leslie. I'm willing to bet that within ten minutes of leaving here your cock is in some girl's pussy."

"What you believe is irrelevant," Ackroyd cut the badger off. "I am telling you that we, seniors, will abstain, and so will you, Freshmen." He smiled toothily. "And that only you need to prove you're doing it by wearing one of these lovely pieces of jewelry." He took a cock cage from the box.

"You touch me with that," Heinley said, and I am going to have you sued.

"Okay, I'll just tell the coach how we found your stash of drugs. You know the policy on drug use among players, right?"

"You wouldn't," the boar said.

"I'd rather not," the lion replied, grinning. "So it's your decision."

"Don't you think you're going too far?" Niel asked. "There's already a threat of a lawsuit."

"Oh, that's not going to happen, right? I mean, would the coach want a player on the team who throws a frivolous lawsuit against another out of spite?"

“This is—” Prusik began.

“Your word against ours,” the lion replied. “Well, I guess it’s also that of every one of you who wants to side against the team.”

“It’s just one fucking month,” someone said.

“One month without sex,” someone else snapped angrily.

For them, Niel thought. He had more options, but he didn’t want to just agree. This was wrong, plain and simple. The question was, did he want to risk his scholarship to fight it? Football had gotten him in, even if he wasn’t sure it was going to be a career. As much as he loved the game, he thought he’d want something quieter to earn a living from. It was why he was working so hard in his history class. Teaching that would be perfect.

“Fuck,” Prusik said, admitting defeat. “That thing better be clean, Ackroyd. I catch anything because of it and I will sue you.”

“Clean and disinfected,” the lion replied proudly. “It isn’t like we want you to get sick and miss games or anything.”

Chapter Five

Niel hated the thing. He'd lost track of the number of times he'd woken up because a night erection had been squeezed to death and its cries of pain. He'd never thought he got that many of them, but he had the irritability of lack of proper sleep now to prove it.

Showering had been another problem. Niel wasn't one to jerk off in the shower. He'd have to get up early enough to allow that and be on time to practice, but trying to clean it had caused just enough sensation he'd gotten another erection strangled out. He had no idea if it was clean enough and he didn't care.

He'd showed up to practice early enough to make the coach happen and had not done one thing differently than he normally did, except maybe glare at the seniors when they snickered at the freshmen with their new jewelry. He leers are them harder and didn't react to the cock cage strangling more erections.

They were not going to break him.

Not only that, he decided as he watched them and the coach preen at the shame and pain the others reacted with. Even Brenden kept himself covered as much as he could in the locker room. But he was going to make a point of having as much fucking sex as he could in that month. He considered arranging for them to be recorded and then having the clips broadcast so that each of them had to see how much fun he was having in spite of their little gift. Show them that Niel Leslie was still getting more tail than all of them put together.

Once he was away from them and had enough academic stuff to do that he had to cool down, he realize that would come back to bite him in the ass in no time at all. Not to say of what it would put his partners through; if he could even get one of them to agree. Even the Frat guys would hesitate to make themselves a show for his revenge.

Still, the part about having the sex, that he was sticking with. Which was why he was stalking the library. If he couldn't find someone here, he'd have to wait for after classes and a trip to the frat

before heading home.

He smiled when he saw the ram. Grinned when he didn't even have to approach. The ram looked up and saw him, smiled. Niel gave a side bob to the bookcases and Luke nodded. Niel headed to the Ancient Rome section paced as he waited. A long five minutes later, the ram appeared.

Niel had him against the wall and almost reached to undo the tail strap when he remembered he needed to check something.

"You said that you prefer bottoming. That means you're willing to top, right? I really need you to top right now."

Luke hesitated. "I, yes, but I don't really have a lot of experience doing it."

Niel grinned and had the tail strap undone. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Get out of those, sit down and I am going to give you something of an education on what power-bottoming is all about." He took the packet of lube from his pocket, then was out of his pants.

The ram stared at the cock cage and Niel told him not to worry about it. To not worry about anything other than what the raccoon took. Then Niel was sitting on Luke's lap, bouncing and kissing him.

* * * * *

Niel moaned around the cock he was sucking on as the capybara plowed his ass. Olavo was moaning, both from fucking the raccoon and being fucked by Bart. Unless the bison had finished and someone else taken his place? Niel had been too busy sucking the cum out of the guys to pay attention. All he wanted was a few hours of mindless sex.

* * * * *

"Oh fuck," Niel moaned in a mix of pain and delight as Erwin ran his fingers over the cock cage without touching it. Over the five first days of the month, he'd sort of gotten used to the cage, he'd even slept through the whole previous night without being woken by an erection, and most of the orgy he hadn't gotten hard either, but this? Fuck, if this kept up, Niel thought his cock would either shatter the metal cock cage, or it was going to die of suffocation.

Whichever it was, it would be worth it.

Like every member of the Society over eighteen, the rabbit had a power. And while not a flashy or a power sought after, Erwin liked it and enjoyed using it. Erwin could clean stuff. He passed his fingers over whatever was dirty, and his power dislodged the grime and did... something. It went away. What the process also did, at least to Niel's cock, was tingle in the most erotic way he had ever experienced.

When Erwin stopped, Niel slackened and panted. Now, all he was left with was a painfully restrained cock and the knowledge it was finally, properly, clean.

"Marry me," the raccoon demanded.

"Make the offer again once that thing's off, and we can discuss coming to a satisfying arrangement."

"Wait a few days," Olavo said, gently running a hand through Niel's chest fur. "The ecstasy of being free might cause you to make a major lapse of judgment in making a contract with a Noble."

"Oh Fuck you, Medeiros," the rabbit replied with a laugh. "The soon-to-be dictator doesn't get to call my family crooked."

"I said no such thing."

“But all the Nobles are lawyers,” Peng said, “so you have to know there isn’t much honesty there.”

“And think about it,” Kuno added. “With your power, you are the perfect guy to not be a lawyer and still be worthy of the family name.”

Niel snickered.

“What?” the rabbit demanded as more began laughing.

“You can clean stuff,” Niel replied, “so you can launder all that dirty money Olavo implies your family has.”

The rabbit rolled his eyes. “You guys realized that each of your families uses lawyers on a nearly daily basis and that MM&J are the best, which means my family is nothing compared to them.”

“Don’t most of your work for them?” Gagan asked.

“Exactly, if we were as crooked as your think, they would be working for us!”

“Isn’t that exactly what the secret mastermind would say to hide the fact they were actually controlling the company?” Niel asked.

“Shut up,” Erwin replied with a laugh, “or I’m not cleaning your cock again.”

“And it’s a real threat,” Kuno said.

“And I am truly horrified at the idea of not having a clean cock for a month,” Niel replied in what he thought was an appropriately terrified voice. Or not, judging by the laughter he caused.

“Why not simply take it off?” Razeen asked, while slowly stroking Limbani. The monkey seemed to have found, if not a match, at least a fan in the jackal. Razeen enjoyed making Limbani cum in a variety of ways.

“The lock makes that tough.”

Razeen shook his head. “I can remove it easily.”

“Is that your power?”

“No, that is what lockpicks are for.”

“Isn’t that just living up to the stereotype that everyone from the middle-east is a thief?” Erwin asked.

“What would the lawyer have against that?” the jackal replied. “And if you are going to live up to anything. Why not make it exactly what people expect? It gives you more time for much more satisfying activities.” He swallowed the cock, making the monkey scream, then was eagerly swallowing.

“I might have said yes a few days ago,” Niel said, “maybe even yesterday.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to admit defeat,” Niel replied simply. “They’re being assholes about it, but they’ve been pushed to it by the coach, and to take it off is going to be admitting that found the thing that hurts me. I know I’m just rationalizing it, but that’s what it feels like to me. Like he’s targeting me personally because I get more than he does or something and everyone else just got caught in the crossfire.”

“A cum covered crossfire,” Limbani said dreamily.

“So I’m going to keep it on. Having Erwin able to clean my cock makes that more bearable. And I am going to have so much fucking sex that it’s going to make his fur fall off if he ever hears about it.”

“Excuse me,” Kuno said, eying him suspiciously, “but Niel Leslie is going to go one month

without topping anyone?” He scoffed. “A hundred said that before the end of next week he has it off and has his cock in someone’s ass.”

“Are you saying I’m a top?”

“I’m saying you’re versatile with one hell of a slant toward top.”

“I say he will last at least two weeks,” Olavo said.

“Are you guys seriously betting on if I’m going to hold out or not?”

“Well, I say my man Niel will hold out,” Erwin said. “Not only that, but I’m willing to put five hundred on that belief.”

Niel narrowed his eyes at the rabbit. “Thank you, I think.”

“You’re welcome, and don’t worry anytime you feel like topping, come see me and I’ll state under oath that you only bottomed for me.”

“You don’t think I can do it either, do you?” Niel replied, getting to his knees.

“I said no such thing,” the rabbit replied solemnly.

“Well, fuck you!” Niel pushed the rabbit on his back. “Actually, someone fuck me, while I suck this asshole’s cock dry.” Before the rabbit could protest, or express his approval, the raccoon had him moaning. Then someone had their cock in his ass.

* * * * *

“Question,” Kuno said, rubbing the soapy water in Niel’s back fur.

“Answer!” Tayang replied and started laughing as if it was the funniest thing ever said.

“Why are we bothering with showers with Noble around?”

“Hey, you start taking me for granted, and I’m going to have to charge for use of my power.”

“How many cock up your ass for a full-body clean?” Kuno asked.

“Including internal?”

“You can do that?” Limbani asked.

“Wait.” Niel frowned. Trying to recall something from his historical medicine textbook. “Does your power remove bacteria too?”

“And someone knows a threat when he ears it!” Erwin exclaimed.

“I don’t get it,” Limbani said.

“The inside of our body’s filled with bacteria that work to our benefit,” Niel explained. “If he kills all of them, it’s not going to be pleasant for you.”

“Can he kill someone that way?” Gagan asked. “That would be one cool way to be an assassin.”

“I don’t think so. The textbook only documented the case where it was discovered that antibiotics were causing problems because they were also killing our internal fauna. I don’t remember it mentioning anyone dying.”

“Anyway, why would you want to give this up?” Bart said, then grunted and Razeen moaned.

Kuno began grinding against Niel’s ass. “He does have a point.”

“Hey Niel, aren’t you guys playing Madison over the next weekend?” Peng asked. “What? I am supportive of our team. I stay up to date on their games.”

“Yeah. Not looking to that four hours bus ride with all those seniors razzing on us.” He moaned and leaned back against the margay as he pushed his cock inside him.

“So that’s what, two full days without sex? Is there someone on your team who can fuck you?”

“Can we talk about this later? I have this cock up my ass right now that I really want to enjoy.”

But the question was in his head now. The one guy he knew was willing to fuck another guy was a freshman too, so in a cage. Even if one of the seniors was willing, it would give Niel blackmail material.

He grunted at the hard thrust from Kuno. “Focus,” the margay said.

Right, he was getting fucked right now. He’d deal with the away game when it happened. It should be simple enough to find a fan there for a quickie. It wasn’t everyone around the football industry that was taking part in No Nut November, right?

* * * * *

Niel was going to kill someone.

He’d gotten up early, like a full hour before the coach would come banging on his door so he could meet up with a fan in the locker’s shower and have a quick one before they’d get going. But the coyote hadn’t been there, and when Niel had turned around, a grinning bear had congratulated him for being so eager for the trip that he came in this early and put him to work packing the stuff they’d need. The coach let it slip while they worked that he’d had to chase off a trophy seeker who’d managed to get into the locker room, somehow; and that because of that, he was going to change the code on all the doors again.

If the bear hadn’t been grinning the entire time he said that, Niel might have been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt as to if he’d actively cock blocked him or it had been an accident.

Before the coach left to go wake the rest, three of the seniors showed up and they kept him busy enough he didn’t even have time to call the coyote to explain what had happened.

Then had been the dreaded bus ride. He’d gotten lucky in that the assistant coach was on his bus and, by all appearance and subdued behavior, wasn’t in on the treatment the seniors had put the Freshmen through. Now that he thought about it, Niel couldn’t recall seeing him in the locker room before and after the practices and games since the start of the month.

As soon as they’d arrived, and before Niel could consider sneaking to the field’s gym, in case there was someone there looking for a nice ass, like one of the opposing players, the coach calling a pre-game meeting.

So here Niel was, in his gear, on the field, looking at the opposition, pent up like he couldn’t remember ever being, and definitely ready to kill someone for what he was being forced to endure.

At least, he had halftime to look forward to.

With a nasty grin, he waited for the ball to be in play, then set to demolish the opposition.

* * * * *

Niel raised his head from between his legs as the halftime announcement sounded. That last tackle had sent him off his feet and left him with a case of vertigo. So he’d been sitting for the last fifteen minutes, waiting for it to pass.

He stood and was steady enough he didn’t need help accompanying the others to the locker, where the coach gave a rousing speech about the game, or maybe the dinner he’d had the day before. Niel was eying the door and counting how long he’d have to find someone to fuck him before they were going back to the field. This was going to have to be the quickest quickie he’d ever had.

As soon as the coach was done, Niel was up and out the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Coach Horgar demanded before Niel had taken four steps away from it.

“For some fresher air, it stinks in there.” Niel barely kept his tone civil. Every second he was kept here meant—

“Really? Don’t you mean you’re going off to get laid?”

Niel rounded on the man. “What do you fucking care?”

“It’s November, the team—”

“Oh, fuck off with the team. This is about you getting your jollies, not team support. I don’t see the seniors in cages. You honestly expect me to believe they aren’t getting laid? That you aren’t? Or is that the point? You can’t get any, so this month is your excuse to make us suffer with you?”

The bear snorted. “Kid, I get laid. More than you, I expect.”

Niel tilted an ear. “Unless you got it four times yesterday, I doubt it.” He smirked at the surprised look on the coach’s face. “Now, unless you have something worthwhile to tell me, I have less than five minutes to—”

“In the locker room, now.”

“Hey, the game doesn’t restart until—”

“You aren’t here to get a cock up your ass. You’re here to help the team win, to get better so you can have a career in the NFL.”

“Who fucking said I want that?”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m here because I’m a good enough player I was offered a scholarship. If that pans out into the NFL, who knows, I might do for it. But unlike most of the guys in there, I’m not hanging all my hopes on it, so how about you fucking give me space to breathe and wait until I’m not playing as well as everyone else before you shove your nose into what I’m doing in my personal time!”

“Coach Horgar,” a woman called from down the hall. “Two minutes before your team needs to be on the field.”

The bear grinned at Niel. “I guess it’s game time.”

Chapter Six

Niel swiped his phone over the scanner and pulled the door open. Tried to. “Fuck,” he grumbled. He was too tired to deal with a scanner on the fritz tonight. He considered himself lucky to have made it from the bus to the dorm as tired as he was.

He’d spent most of the second half benched, but not because of what he’d told the coach. Niel was good enough he’d been needed on the field, but after the third tackle he’d had trouble getting up and he stumbled getting back to the lineup. A paramedic had pulled him out of play to check him over and had had him sit for a while. Niel ate a couple of energy bars in the meantime, since he hadn’t gotten anything during halftime and was regretting it. He did another play but had been tackled hard, and his head swam for the rest of the game.

The trip back hadn’t been restful, with the team celebrating the victory and not caring that he was tired. By the time they’d reached the university dorms, everyone was quiet, but Niel had been working just as he’d finally fallen asleep to walk through the cold night to his room.

And now, the damned door didn’t want to unlock.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Brenden whispered from three doors down.

“Trying to unlock our door.” Niel felt like kicking the thing. Maybe punching the scanner would help.

“Well, stop it, that’s Carmichael’s room, and he is going to kill you if you wake him.”

Niel turn to roll his eyes at the cougar, but Brenden had the door open and motioned for Niel to get in. He decided he was too tired to argue. If there was a bed there, he was falling into it and hoping for unconsciousness.

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Niel rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the whiteboard where the list of passages the professor had been talking about was written. He had been certain he’d set up the links ahead of time, but he couldn’t find them. Fortunately, Professor Rogers understood students weren’t always on the

ball, so he always had the relevant information on the board for them to search and access from their phones.

Only Niel had trouble getting his eyes to focus.

He'd slept, or at least been unconscious, and since there was never practice after a game night, he'd been able to sleep until nine, not that it had helped. Getting showered and dressed had taken twice as long, and even knowing he might be late for his class hadn't been enough to get him to hurry. Or rather, he'd wanted to, but his body wasn't cooperating.

Fuck, he hoped he wasn't coming down with something.

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It was a good thing he wasn't being charged by the plate, Niel thought as he put the tray down on the table. His head had cleared slightly, his body didn't feel like it was packed into so much cotton, but he was ravenous.

"You going for some weight gain contest?" Jessica asked. She was in his Ancient French and Russian History class, which meant that on Wednesday they ate together, since one was before lunch and the other after.

"Just feeding the flu."

"You starve the flu, and feed a cold," the lioness responded.

"You sure?"

"You're a history buff, don't you know your sayings?"

"I'm a football player, we don't know anything."

"You certainly get hit on the head often enough to justify that one. That last tackle was pretty hard last night."

He nodded. His position didn't get the ball often, but once in a while, things lined up, as they had at the last game, and he'd intercepted a pass, only for the other team to take him down hard. It had given his team the ball but taken him out for the rest of the game.

Maybe that was what was wrong with him? The paramedic had cleared him, but maybe this was a delayed concussion? Was that a thing?

It was probably just the flu.

"Earth to Niel, you still with me?"

"Uh? Yeah, I am. Sorry. You were saying?"

"That you got hit hard. Did anyone make sure you were okay? Maybe you should go to the infirmary?"

"I'll be fine. I'll go to bed after the class." He started on the demolishing of his tray filled with enough food for the three people he felt his stomach was demanding he eat.

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Niel shouldered the stall door open to the loud gurgling of his intestines, then barely had his pants down and was sitting before they emptied themselves painfully.

Fuck.

Wasn't feeling sick mixed with diarrhea a sign he'd caught food poisoning? Had he eaten anything before the game? He certainly hadn't during or after. He didn't think so, and he couldn't believe he'd caught this from the cafeteria. Food poisoning didn't act this fast, did it?

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Niel stared at the text on his phone. It was the reading material assigned for the Russian Monarchy essay he had to hand over next week. Only they looked like blurred squiggles instead of letters.

“You look like shit,” Brenden commented, exiting the bathroom wearing only a towel. He walked stiffly. He too, wasn’t over the punishment he’d received during the game.

“You don’t need glasses. Congratulations,” Niel replied bitterly.

“What did the nurse say you have?”

“Nothing. It’ll pass, I just need to finish this and I’ll go to bed.”

“Dude, you should go to the infirmary.”

“It’s just the flu.” Niel’s stomach gurgled. “Or food poisoning.” He suddenly felt fully away and ran for the bathroom. Good thing his roommate was done. The way his body was behaving, Niel didn’t think he’d made it to the restroom at the end of the hall.

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He never wanted to see that again. He decided, returning to his desk. He wasn’t in the habit of looking at what was in the bowl once he was done, but he was pretty sure it should all be brown, not... those colors.

“You heading out?” he asked the cougar, who was dressing.

“Yeah. Melany wants to meet up. I’m not inviting you. I don’t want you to give her whatever you have.”

“Then I hope I haven’t given it to you. Can you bring me back a sandwich when you come back?”

“Dude, how are you hungry if you’re sick?”

Niel shrugged.

“I’ll stop by the cafeteria and bring you one. It’ll be a few hours.”

“I’ll survive.” He hoped.

* * * * *

“I can’t, sorry. I have an essay to finish, and I’ve caught a bug while in Madison. Sex is the surest way to pass that on to you, and you haven’t pissed me off, Luke.”

“That sucks. I really wanted to explore Ancient Rome some more,” the ram replied.

“Ancient Rome isn’t going anywhere. I’ll show you more about it in a day or two. But thanks for the offer.”

He disconnected and placed another call. Why hadn’t he thought about this earlier? Olavo could fuck him to full health.

“You have reached Olavo Medeiros’s message center. If this is regarding classes, press one, if this is frat business, press two, if you are a friend, press three.” He pressed three. “Hi, I’m unreachable until the end of the day tomorrow. Sorry about that. If it’s something that can’t wait, call Kuno. He can probably help with whatever you need. Otherwise, leave your name and I’ll call you back once I’m in town again.”

Niel put the phone down. Could he bother the margay for a healer over a stomach bug? They probably had more important things to do than help an outsider feel better, regardless of Niel and Kuno’s history, especially since part of that was fabricated.

This would only be a few days. He would survive the misery, if not the coach's reaction, when he didn't play at his best.

* * * * *

How many ways were there to fail? Niel couldn't think of the answer. He couldn't think of much because of the fog in his mind, but he was confident he'd found all of them as they applied to playing football.

He'd tripped over his own feet. Dropped just about every ball that was thrown at him and even Carl, the lightest of the players, had sent him on his ass with a shoulder block.

It was a good thing this was just practice. The coach would kill him if he was this horrible during a—

“Leslie! Get over here!” Coach Horgar yelled.

With a sigh, Niel accepted Carl's hand and got up. He ambled to the bear, taking care not to move too quickly or his head would spin out of his skull.

“Are you okay?” the bear asked, searching Niel's face.

“I'm fine.” He did his best to show his strong side.

“How about you tell me the truth this time? I can see you aren't fine. I think the team in Madison can see it too right now.”

“I think I caught a bug at the game. Maybe the locker room wasn't properly cleaned after their last game or something.”

The bear looked over the field where the others were training in worry before focusing back on Niel. “You think. Are you telling me you haven't gone to the infirmary yet?”

Niel shrugged. “It's just a bug, it'll pass.”

“And before that, you might pass it on to everyone one else.” The bear cursed. “Do you know what that could do to their chances?” He let out a breath. “Go see the nurse, don't argue. You kids and your damned belief you can survive anything. Half the sick time on this team would be avoided if your first reaction was to think you caught the plague and went to the nurse.”

“I'd just be spreading it to her if I did. It's called the plague because there's no cure.”

“It's the twenty-first century. There's a cure for everything, including whatever you have. Go see the nurse.”

Niel headed off the field and dropped the shoulder pads on a bench in the locker room. He'd put it away on his way back, once the nurse told him he'd be fine in a few days and to take it easy until then. When else was she going to do, send him to the hospital for a stomach bug?

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Niel opened his eyes slowly to a steady beeping near his ear, and distant conversations, urgent and indistinct. He was lying on a bed. In a room with a machine on his left showing his heart rate. That was where the beeping came from. There were other machines lining the wall, but as he turned to get a look, something pinched on his arm and he stared at the IV connected to it.

He was in a hospital.

What was he doing in a hospital? It wasn't from the game. He'd been woozy, but he'd walked away from that. He'd made it back to the dorms, went to place. Has been off, but made it, then there was training the next morning, fumbling too many balls—man was he in a bad way if that didn't even sound funny as he thought it—then the coach sending him to see the nurse who...

Why didn't he remember reaching the infirmary?

He'd made it to the lockers, left without the shoulder pads, and...

Clearly, he hadn't made it to the infirmary and, however that had happened, had led to him being here. He wished being in the hospital meant he'd feel better, instead of about the same, as well as hungry. Now he wished he'd eaten something before practice instead of worrying about what would happen. His stomach had to have settled now.

He located the call button and pressed it.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and a doctor entered, stethoscope and all, followed by a nurse and Coach Horgar and his father.

"Mister Leslie," the doctor said, and she smiled reassuringly. "I'm glad to see you're away. You have good timing, your father just arrived."

"Is it a bad cliché for me to tell you he's Mister Leslie and I'm just Niel?"

She chuckled. "Fortunately for you, we aren't in a movie, so it doesn't matter. Now, I have a few questions for you before I answer some of your own. When's the last time you ate?"

"Around nine last night, a sandwich, which I regretted a couple of hours later. I think I have a stomach bug. Food's going right through me."

She made notes on her pad. "How long had that been going on?"

"The first time was that afternoon, a couple of hours after lunch. It's why I didn't eat this morning."

"Mister Horgar mentioned you said you might have caught something during your game in Madison. Any reason why you think that?"

"Just guessing. I woke up yesterday feeling off. I thought it was just the after-effect of a hard game, and I was tackled a few times, but then it got worse and after lunch, I figured it had to be a bug and the only place I've been out of the ordinary if in Madison."

"So just to be clear, you're feeling lethargic, you have issues focusing, and you have diarrhea." Niel nodded.

"Alright. We're confirmed you don't have a stomach flu; or any flu. You have bruises, but nothing I wouldn't expect from a teenager or a football player. You don't have a concussion or show signs of having had one recently."

"Recently?" Stewart asked.

"Once the body heals, the only way to determine if someone has had a concussion is through their changes in behavior. What's called Post-Concussion Syndrome. We have specialized scans we can run if we suspect that to be the cause, but at this time, nothing points to that."

"Then what is wrong with my son?"

"I don't know."

"Look, he was admitted after fainting in school and Coach Horgar told the nurse about the rest. Clearly, something is going on with him."

"Yes," she answered, "but Niel was admitted less than two hours ago. We have him on a drip and we took blood that's being studied, but your son is clearly not in danger. So the results might—" the pad beeped. "Be here now." She smiled and read. Her smile dropped. "Okay, this is odd. Niel, you're sure you ate yesterday?"

"Yes, like I said, a lot of it went right through me, but I had lunch, dinner, and a sandwich."

“Your blood sugars’ unusually low, but your insulin’s fine. We’re not seeing the corresponding ketones looking for more glucose.” She looked up. “Alright, this might be nothing more than something going wrong with the test we ran.”

“But,” Stewart pressed.

“But I want to confirm everything before I attempt to assign a condition to your son.”

“Look, clearly you have an opinion,” Coach Horgar said. “So why don’t you just lay it on us. We’re adults, we can take it for what it is, but it’s going to be better than leaving us to come up with worst-case scenario.”

“I’m with the coach.”

Niel stayed silent. She’d said ‘attempt’. She wasn’t even sure that with confirming the tests were right, she’d know what was wrong with him. She looked at him, then took the coach and his father out of the room.

Niel sighed. Maybe he should have said he wanted the guess, too. He didn’t care to be left in the dark.

Although... he lifted the covers and pulled the hospital gown up, then smiled. If nothing else, the trip had caused the damned cage to be removed.

Chapter Seven

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Niel became aware of a conversation around him and forced his eyes open. His father was talking with a doctor, with another joining in occasionally.

“Hey,” Niel said and even that took a lot of effort. The sun was up, around noon, by the way it shone through the window. Why was he so tired if he’d slept so long? Why was his sheet tented? Great, did he have morning wood in front of the strangers, worse, his father? And why was Stewart looking at the tent worriedly?

Then his father was at his side. “Hey buddy, how are you feeling?”

“Like crap,” Niel replied and didn’t have the strength to laugh. Fuck, he’d been trying for a joke. “What’s wrong with me?”

“It’s,” Stewart began, then stopped. He looked at the doctor, a different one from yesterday.

“I can tell you what is happening to you,” the elk said. He had an authoritative voice. The kind that promised answers. “But not why.”

“Okay, I guess that’s a start.” Niel caught looking at his crotch again. Please let not this be that kind of dream. Niel was happy the bat hadn’t pulled his father into this like he had Roland’s. That was one set of memory he wouldn’t want to untangle.

“You’re tired because you’re basically running out of energy.”

“Because of what I ate going through me?” he volunteered.

“It’s... more complicated than that.” The elk looked at his pad. “We have you on a drip with glucose and protein and amino acid. Basically, something we’d put someone in a coma on because they can’t feed themselves, but none of it is being absorbed by your system. Not only that, but in spite of how you are basically starving, your body’s not attacking itself to get nutrition. We’ve checked your urine and stool—” Niel didn’t remember them doing that and he was happy for it. “—and everything

we give you simply come out, unprocessed.”

“That’d be why my shit was all those weird colors?”

The elk looked at him, then the other doctor, who shook his head. “That would have been good to know earlier. Care to elaborate?”

“Not really,” Niel said, then saw the serious expression. “I just glanced in, it’s not like I make a habit of it, and there was bright green, reds, blues, violets.”

“Do you remember what you had to eat before that?” Niel told him what dinner had consisted of, realizing that the green had matched the spinach salad with tomatoes, so the blue could have been the pie.

“It’s a good thing I haven’t had anything to eat,” Niel said, “because thinking about this is making me feel like I’m going to throw-up.”

The nurse place a metal bean-shaped bowl next to the raccoon’s head, and that was enough to make him not want to do it.

“Yes, somehow it does seem like you are voiding what you eat without it getting processed anymore more than chewing, the stomach acids, and mashing of the intestines. Quite baffling. Another interesting phenomenon is your near-constant erection.”

“Can we not talk about my junk?”

“Actually, it’s very interesting,” the elk said without looking. “While erections in all levels of sickness and weakness happen, it is an independent system, if you will and only requires sufficient blood for it to—”

“Doctor,” Stewart said, looking sick, “my son said he doesn’t want to hear about it.”

“Of course. My apology.” He folded his hand over the tablet. Which he rested against his stomach. “As I said, I can tell you what is happening to you, just not why, or even how it’s possible. If it was only the food you ate, I could hazard a guess that somehow the lining of your digestive system had become impermeable, but even what we put directly in your bloodstream stays out of it. It is as if everything we consider essential for our nutrition your body somehow considers foreign.”

Niel listened, but couldn’t help noticing how sick his father was getting. Stewart caught the side glances and straightened.

“Then I’m taking my son home.”

“Mister Leslie,” the elk said. “I can’t advise you to do that. Your son is in a dire condition, he needs to be supervised.”

“No, my son needs to be out of here and where I can—” Stewart closed his mouth and rubbed his face. “My son needs to be home.”

“No,” the elk said, tone firm. “Your son needs to be under constant care and supervision so—”

“You can watch me die?”

That made the doctor close his mouth.

“I mean, that’s what not getting any nutrition means, right? You said it, I’m starving. If my body won’t eat itself to keep me alive, how long do I have?”

The doctor hesitated. “My job is to see to it that you have the best chances of survival.”

“Okay, so what are you going to do? Unless you’ve discovered how to put me in cryogenic sleep in the last two days, what’s left that you even think might work?”

“We might be able to come up with a specific combination of amino acids and proteins that your

system would accept.”

Steward snorted.

“Dad?”

“You haven’t heard them flounder about. I doubt they even have any idea what to do anymore.”

“Not give up,” the elk said.

“I’m not giving up on my son!” Stewart was up and looked like he wanted to yell a lot more.

“But,” he continued once he calmed, “I am not going to have him stay here when it’s clear there is nothing you can do for him.”

“Mister Leslie, just because we don’t know, right now, what the correct course is, isn’t a reason to act like we will not find it.”

“In two days?” Niel asked. He’d read that someone could survive for a week without food or water. Without the body as fuel, how short did that become?

“There’s no way to know,” the doctor said, “but giving up isn’t the way to handle it.”

“But in the end, it is our decision, right?” Like his father, Niel wasn’t giving up. He knew of an entirely different avenue he could look into, but he couldn’t do that from the hospital. He was sure Kuno would come if called, but it would be a lot easier at home. One person to explain magic to was easier to deal with than an entire medical staff. If Kuno was even going to help under those conditions.

“Yes, you are an adult, so the decision falls on you if you want to be treated or not, but I have to advise against it.”

“I appreciate it, but I want to go home.”

(just a note there was a comment about mentioning Niel’s deceased mother, but I couldn’t find a way to make it fit)

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Niel fiddled with his phone, looking out the window at the passing buildings. He wanted to call Kuno to let him know what was going on, or even just text him, but with his father present there were too many chances he’d glance at the wrong time and see something too difficult to explain without someone from the Society there as evidence. Once he was home, and in his room, he could get his father out for a while and take with Kuno.

They drove onto the highway and the car accelerated, a lot.

“Dad?”

“Everything’s going to be okay, Niel.”

“Not if you crash, it won’t.”

Stewart looked at the speedometer and slowed the car, but not enough for Niel’s comfort.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“I’m going to fix this.”

“You’re going to fix what is wrong with me?” Niel asked cautiously. He tried to come up with something to defuse the tension, but he wasn’t at his best right now.

“No, that’s permanent, but I know what you have to do so you won’t die.”

“Dad, what are you talking about?” He noticed the sign as his father took the ramp to head west on the ninety-four. “Dad, home’s on the east side.”

Stewart held the wheel so tightly the fur on his knuckles stood up.

“Dad, what do I have to do? You said you knew what I had to do to survive.”

“You have to have sex.”

Niel looked at his father incredulously. “Is that you trying to be funny, Dad? Because of how much sex I have?”

“What? No, of course not. You know I don’t care about that so long as you’re safe. This is your grandfather’s fault.”

Niel was in no state to deal with his father losing his mind. “What grandfather? Both yours and mom’s died years ago.”

Stewart glanced at him before focusing on the road. “Mine’s alive.”

“You said he died before I was born.”

“It was simpler that you think that. The day you were conceived is the last time I saw him. He was like you.”

“Like me? You mean a raccoon, like you and mom. Dad, I’m dying. I wish you’d make sense during that time.”

“You’re not dying! You need sex; like he did.”

Niel rested his head against the window. The cool glass helped mitigate his headache. Maybe the best thing was to let his father get whatever this was out of his system. Once they got to their destination, he’d go to the bathroom, call Kuno, and at least could make the arrangement to get them to his house. Hopefully, Olavo was back, and if not, this would be enough to get him back.

They exited the highway, then were in a residential neighborhood that felt like their own. Firmly middle class. He parked behind a pickup and was out of the car before Niel could ask where they were.

Stewart opened the passenger side door and helped Niel exit. He tried to resist, but his father already had to support most of his weight. Then they were headed to the door, which opened before they were there.

“Stew?” a mole-rat said, “what are you doing here?” he had a slight middle European accent. Niel didn’t remember his name, but he remembered him from the factory where his dad supervised the team of machinists who made sure everything kept working. The mole-rat was on that team.

“Petro, you remember my son, Niel. We need your help.” The mole-rat took Niel’s other side and helped Niel into a living room seat while Stewart closed and locked the door. “You have to have sex with my son or he’s going to die.”

Petro looked at Stewart, Niel, then Stewart again. “I will go make some coffee.”

“We don’t have time!”

“There is always time for coffee,” the mole-rat said as he disappeared down the hall. Niel agreed with him.

“Dad, how about you wait for the coffee, calm down, then explain what the fuck you’re doing?”

“I’m saving your life. If he doesn’t have sex with you, you’re going to die, I told you that.”

“But not how that is.”

Instead of sitting, Stewart paced the length of the room. Petro returned with a tray with a clay pot, three cups, a container of sugar, and one of cream. Niel hesitated when the mole-rat offered him a cup, worried it would just go through him like the rest, then accepted it. It was coffee. He could deal with what came from enjoying it. He took it with his usual two sugars.

“Now,” Petro said, offering a cup to Stewart, to which he’d already added some cream and three sugars. The fact he knew exactly how his father liked his coffee made Niel wonder if they were more than coworkers. That his father had driven them here for help made them friends, at least. “Why don’t you explain what this is about.”

Stewart took the cup and kept pacing. “Niel’s dying and you have to have sex with him so he won’t die. I’d do it, but we’re related and... I was warned against it.”

Niel stared at his father. For him to consider them having sex meant he really believed it would help him, but why would he have been warned against it, and by whom? This felt like more than some societal taboo.

“Why me?” there was a seriousness in Petro’s tone that told Niel he too had picked up on Stewart’s desperation.

“You’re the only gay guy I could think of. I’d have taken him to a club, but I doubt anyone would have been interested, and it isn’t like I know the kind of scenes where sex with someone sick is their thing.”

“Stewart, do you hear yourself talk? If Niel is sick, he should be in the hospital.”

“I was,” Niel said, “but the doctor doesn’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“So you’re okay with me having sex with you?” Petro asked.

“I’m gay, if that’s your question. You’re older than I usually go for, though.”

“Niel, this isn’t about what you like; it’s about staying alive,” Stewart exclaimed.

“Who you have sex with is important, Stewart,” Petro said. “You don’t just go grab the first guy who says yes.”

“You don’t know Limbani,” Niel muttered in his cup.

“Fuck this.” Stewart started undoing his pant. “I don’t care what the consequences are going to be, I am not going to let my son die.”

“Whoa, Dad! Keep your pants on, please.” Okay, so the stories Roland told him about how strained Thomas and their father’s relationship had been as they settled in Taiwan weren’t as funny now that he had his father saying he’d have sex with him.

“Stewart, settle down,” the mole-rat said, standing. “Clearly this is important to you, so I’ll do, if Niel is willing.”

The relief on his father’s face made Niel agree. He didn’t know how he’d perform in his state, but once it was done, his father would take him home, and there he’d call Kuno and arrange to be cured.

Chapter Eight

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Petro sat Niel on the bed, then closed the door. “I’m not sure how to go about this.”

Niel tilted an ear. “You don’t know how to have sex?”

The mole-rat rolled his eyes. “I never had a dad ask me to have sex with his kid.”

“I’m not a virgin, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It had crossed my mind, with Stewart’s claims you need sex to live.”

Niel nodded. “That’s...” he wanted to say weird, but while he didn’t see how he could suddenly get such a condition, he’d been around magic enough in the last two years to not be able to discount it outright. “If it doesn’t do anything, at least we’re going to have sex. I’m always game for that, even if I like to be more active in it normally.”

“I guess we’d better get to it then, before Stewart decided to check in on us.” Petro took off his shirt.

“God, that would be embarrassing.” Niel undid the buttons, but pulling the shirt off proved to be more than he could manage in his weakened state. The mole rat took it off him before undoing his pants, then was getting naked himself.

The two looked each other over. Petro had a paunch, but also muscle under the layer of fat. His dad often talked about machinery needing to be moved and all the physical work that went into that. The man before Niel looked like he could do that work. Niel looked at the semi-hard cock and smiled.

“Liking what you see, I guess that’s good.”

He did. The cock was larger than it had been soft, so it would be bigger by the time he was fully hard. Niel would feel it.

“What about you?” Niel spread his arms, and the motion sent him falling back on the bed.

“You’re definitely good-looking; if younger than what I go for. A bit surprised that you’re hard,

though.”

Niel sighed and didn't bother trying to sit. "I've been popping wood all day. And you're going to be the oldest guy I've had sex with."

"How do you want to do this? I can turn the lights off if that makes you more comfortable."

"I'm good. But since I won't be able to do much more than lie here, on my stomach is probably the best way to do it."

Petro turned Niel over, then hesitated before climbing on the bed. He pulled a bottle of lube from the nightstand, then use a finger to lube and loosened Niel's ass.

The finger came to a sudden stop. "Shit, I didn't even ask if you were okay with me putting my fingers in there."

"I'm good, and while I appreciate the thought, lubing me is going to be enough."

"Okay." The mole rat climbed over Niel, then was rubbing his cock between the cheeks. He searched, then Niel's ass stretched as the cock entered him.

He sighed. "That's nice."

Petro pushed and pulled slowly, almost hesitatingly, and Niel moaned, enjoying the way the cock moved. He did feel it, and the crown had gotten larger and he felt that. He grunted as his prostate got rubbed. The mole rat chuckled and readjusted so the following thrust targeted it.

Niel tightened his ass around the cock and the sensation increased. As did Petro's speed.

"Look," the man panted, "I don't have the longest fuse, so—" the rest was strangled by Niel tightening his ass again. More weight was on Niel's back as Petro shifted. Then he was fucking him hard.

Less than a minute later, the mole rat tensed and came. Niel closed his eyes and let out a sigh of appreciation at the pulsating cock in his ass. Then Petro rolled off.

"Sorry if that didn't live up to what you kids can do these days."

Niel chuckled and raised his head. "Don't apologize, it was nice."

"Nice, huh? I'll take that."

"Yes, Nice." Niel raised himself by putting his arms under him. "Once you're rested, you can fuck me again." He looked at the position he was in.

Petro laughed. "Once I'm rested? You do get that at my age, you're looking at a couple of hours before I can get it up again."

Niel slowly pushed himself to his knees. He still felt hungry, but he had enough energy to move by himself now. He smiled at the mole-rat who was looking at him, eyes wide.

"In that case, how do you feel about me toping you?"

"Are you going to be able to?"

Niel considered the man's extra mass and how he felt. "Maybe on your stomach. I don't know if I could support your legs." He looked for the lube. "Do you need me to loosen you?"

"Yeah, it's been a while."

Niel went slow as he pushed a slick finger into Petro's ass, then two. By the time he had a third one in, the man was moaning loudly in a pillow. Niel positioned himself and pushed his cock in. He mimicked what had been done to him, using quick thrusts to push ever deeper, but he didn't manage to snag the prostate. Once he bottomed, Niel moved to slow and long thrust out and in. And the mole-rat was vocal in his appreciation of the technique.

Niel picked up speed, trying to outrun the exhaustion he could feel returning. It would suck to be too tired to be able to cum.

The ass tightened on his cock and Niel grunted, then shoved hard before cumming.

“Fuck.” He panted, supporting his weight with his arms.

“Glad that worked on you too.”

Niel chuckled. He pulled out and rested on his knees. He considered lying down when he noticed he was still hard and that he wasn’t as tired, or felt as hungry.

“Do you mind if I fuck you again?”

Petro looked over his shoulder. “You’re still hard? Fuck, I miss being a kid. Go right ahead.” He put his head back on the pillow and Niel went ahead.

* * * * *

And ahead, and ahead.

Petro stopped him after the sixth time because his ass was raw, and by then, Niel felt like his old self. He rolled on his back and grinned. “You rested enough to fuck me?”

“Do you ever get enough?”

Niel yawned. “Sometimes.” He closed his eyes. “But I can go for…”

* * * * *

Niel woke up in an empty bed, and it took him a few seconds to remember why he was in such a large bed, instead of the one in his dorm. He sat and stretched, going over how he felt. He was sore, sticky, but otherwise, he was fine. No longer famished, not weak. He stood, walked around the bed. He was the only one in the room, and it had an attached bathroom. He thought about a long shower, but he could just make out conversation through the closed door.

He settled on relieving himself. A shower could wait until after he had answers.

Niel approached the living room in a stretching silence.

“How about you stop beating around the bush, Stewart, and explain to me how that’s even possible? Your kid was at death’s door, then he was going at it like he was some perpetual motion machine. I don’t think he’d have stopped if I hadn’t stopped him. And that’s the only time when it caught up to him and fell asleep mid-sentence.”

“Petro, I don’t know that you’ll believe it, and Niel should be here for that.”

Niel knocked on the wall to announce his arrival before entering. “I’m here, and I’d like to know.” His father looked like he’d protest, so Niel dropped in a seat.

With a sigh, the raccoon slumped. “Alright. I guess it’s obvious you need sex to live now.”

Niel nodded. “The how would be interesting to know.”

Steward ran a hand over his face. “Okay, I don’t know the details. My grandfather told me enough I’d understand, but I didn’t really believe more of it myself. I mean. The fact he didn’t look any different when I saw him twenty years apart lend credence to his story, but… Okay. So, there’s always been stories floating around my grandfather. Supposedly he was part of an expedition to Antarctica during World War Two, depending on who’s telling it, He was part of a US group dedicated to countering Hitler’s quest for mystical artifacts, or it was a spy on the trail of a Nazi ring either after a secret there or looking to hide something, or it was just an archaeological expedition. Jarod’s never confirmed any of them, and until now, I’m not sure I took it seriously that he was that old.”

Stewart took out his wallet and turned it in his hand. “Things there turned bad. Either because

of the weather, or some secret weapon, betrayal, you name it, a story supports it. But they end up stranded, needing shelter and only a few of them make it to some sort of ruin. They were protected from the worst of the elements, but still starving to death. Then something appeared before them.”

“Something?” Niel asked, trying to hide his trepidation. In the memories the bat had fabricated for him, where he was good friends with the guys at the frat, Chima had told him a story about how the Society had formed. Niel was such a friend, after all, that kind of discussion was normal. It had involved some underground cave, old stones, and a being appearing before the men assembled there. A god who would become theirs.

“He, the stories always agree on that, whatever he was, he was a male. I don’t think I need to explain why they said that, right?” Stewart looked at his son, but it was Petro who chuckled.

“Is this going to get pornographic?”

“No. And if it did, I wouldn’t talk about it. That being, according to the stories, offered to save the men there.”

“The men?” Niel asked, his worry climbing.

“Yeah. That’s what the stories say, anyway. The way they were going to survive was that they’d live not off food, but sex. This last part, Jarod told me himself, it’s not in any of the stories. Which I guess should have been a clue they were true in some way. But that gift would be passed down the bloodline, and it would be activated if a son has sex with his father.”

Niel swallowed. That was way too much like—

Petro burst out laughing. “You mean, that guy is your kid’s biological father?”

Niel looked at the mole-rat. What was he talking about? Stewart’s ears were folded back and he couldn’t look at Niel.

The silence stretched.

“Shit,” Petro mumbled. “I’m sorry Stewart, I thought he knew.”

“Knew what?”

The mole rat stood. “I’m going to... I need a shower so I’m going to leave you two alone.”

“What is he talking about, Dad?”

“It’s complicated,” Stewart mumbled.

“Speak up and uncomplicate it for me, because it sounded a lot like he said you aren’t my dad.”

“I am your father, Niel. I changed your diapers; I wiped your ass and your nose. I help you when your mom didn’t come back from the hospital. Make no mistake, I am your father. It’s just that...”

“Yes?”

“Me and your mom tried for years, before you, to have kids.”

“I know that. You’d given hope of having a son by the time I came about.”

“We went to doctors, trying to get help.”

“Dad,” Niel said through clenched teeth.

“I’m infertile, Niel.”

“I don’t understand.”

Stewart let out a breath. “The reason we’d given up hope was that there was no hope to be had. I can’t father a child.”

“But I’m here.” Niel swallowed. “I... not your son.”

“You are my son,” Stewart repeated with vigor. “Where your DNA came from is irrelevant.”

“Are you kidding? That’s what makes me who I am.”

“No, Niel. That just determines part of what you look like, and that’s as close to me as I could manage. Who you are, that’s from what you lived, how you were raised. And that I was a part of, not Jarod.”

“So you fall on the nurture part of the equation?” How could his father have kept this from him? Not his father, that man. “Who’s this Jarod?”

Stewart pulled a picture from his wallet and handed it to Niel.

“Really? What is this, pre-digital?”

“Jarod likes his old things.” (I’m going with that as the excuse Jarod tells anyone for why there is so little information about him online. The reality is that he’s doing all he can so the others can’t track him down digitally)

The picture was of two raccoons in a living room. Niel didn’t recognize it, but he could see the family resemblance. The older raccoon, who had to be in his late twenties, or early thirties, was an almost copy of his father. The one in his early twenties didn’t look familiar.

“Who’s the young one?”

“That’s Jarod. I’m standing next to him.”

Niel’s head snapped up. “You said Jarod was your grandfather.”

Stewart nodded. “As part of the deal he and the others in the story made, something was done to them. Jarod stopped aging.”

Niel studied the picture again. “Okay, well, I didn’t have sex with this guy, so whatever’s going on, I think you can consider those stories not to be true.”

“Are you one hundred percent sure?” There was hope and dread in his father’s voice.

“Of course I’m sure. It isn’t like I throw myself at orgies all the — oh fuck.”

“What?”

Niel took his phone out.

Well, he had told those guys that if he ever had something weird happen to him because of sex, he would go to them for help instead of running off.

#

Chapter Nine

Niel looked out the window as they entered Frat Row, ignoring the looks his father sent him. He parked in front of Sigma Theta Gamma, and Niel was out before the engine was turned off. He didn't run. He just wanted space the car hadn't provided. He buzzed the door, and Stewart joined him before it was answered.

The elephant looked at them. "Yes?"

"Hey, Gagan. Is Kuno around?" He fought the urge to just barge in. He should have texted, let the margay know he was coming, at least.

"I don't know." The elephant looked at Niel's father. "I think he's with someone. Come in, before one of the seniors accuses me of not being a good representation on the frat and decides to punish me."

"The cage?"

Gagan stared at him, first in confusion, then horror. Right. That hadn't been used since the bat, even in jest. "Can I tell him what this is about?" he asked once he closed the door.

Niel sighed. "Remember when I told your guys that if I somehow ended up with some strange magic-related condition, I'd come to see you instead of running off?"

Stewart coughed.

"Yeah," Gagan said hesitatingly, glancing at the older raccoon. "That was part of the joke."

"I wish," Niel muttered, then sighed again. "Turns out I've developed a case of needing sex to stay alive, and that I probably caught it during the party, so I'm really hoping you kept a list of all the guys who attended."

Glass shattering on the floor cut off Gagan's reply. Niel stepped around the elephant to look at the living room's doorway. Olavo was the only one there, holding a glass with a finger of amber liquid in one hand, the remnant of a decanter at his feet, with liquid splashed all the way top the foot of the couch. The look of horror on the capybara's face gave Niel pause.

“Are you okay?” he asked lamely.

Olavo shook his head. “I think my father’s going to kill me.”

* * * * *

Olavo closed the door to the study, cutting off Gagan’s complaining about cleaning up someone else’s mess, and leaned against it. He was muttering in Spanish under his breath. Then he was reaching into his pants, giving it a few strokes, which caused Stewart to gape, then he was tracing symbols on the door.

“Why didn’t you ever mention you were part of the Survivors? (I think that’s what you called the Antarctica group)”

“They have a name?” Niel asked. “Wait, you know about that? That made it safe to talk, right?” Niel paused. “Why are you keeping this conversation from the others?”

Olavo looked from one to the other. “Alright. I need to know a few things before I can get into anything else. One, why didn’t you tell us?”

“I didn’t know.”

The capybara looked at Stewart with incredulity. “You didn’t tell him?”

Stewart seemed unable to decide if he should be annoyed at the tone or embarrassed at something. “I don’t really know anything either,” he finally admitted.

“How can you not? You’re his father, you know how this works.”

“He isn’t,” Niel said flatly.

Olavo stared at him. He pulled a chair and dropped into it. “Okay, I need a lot more information then. Do you know who your biological father is?”

“My great grandfather,” Niel answered when Stewart didn’t.

“We wanted to make sure he was genetically part of my family,” the older raccoon said defensively. “Niel is my son.”

“And you haven’t been educated on how any of this works?”

Stewart shook his head. “The only thing Jarod told me was that if Niel had sex with his father, his condition would become active.”

“That’s why I need the list of who was at the party. I don’t remember a raccoon in his twenties, but there were a lot of guys, and the whole night kind of turned into a blur.”

“He told you it would only happen if Niel had sex with his father?”

Stewart nodded. “I’m not into that stuff, so it wasn’t like that was a problem. Oh, and Jarod basically vanished again after that. I do have a number where I can leave messages, and I have, but my understanding is that he needs to go there physically or call in to get them. Jarod isn’t big on technology.”

“That isn’t how it works,” Olavo said. “All it takes is a man from that bloodline who is initiated.”

“So it didn’t have to be a raccoon?”

The capybara shook his head.

“Do you know who it is?”

Olavo hesitated. “I think I do. But since you don’t know anything about them, I think it’s best if I give you a rundown. First thing, they don’t advertise. The compact they made with Him works differently, so they never felt the need to incorporate within the Society. Do you know about

Antarctica?”

“The stories I’ve been told mentioned Jarod going there,” Stewart said. “The why is nebulous, and the what happened there even more so.”

“It was an archaeological expedition. I don’t know those details because they’ve never been of interest. They were caught in a storm. Most of them died. Five survived and made it into a cavern.”

“Some sort of ancient site,” Stewart provided.

Olavo considered it, then shrugged. “A stone block and six pillars. To a certain Society, that would be a holy site, so yes. To the rest, to them. It was barely a place to get out of the elements. That’s where He appeared to them. They made a pact, gained abilities. With them, and a lot of luck made it off that continent and ended up in Argentina, where my family helped them. That’s why I know about them. That and because one of them was a capybara, he became really close to my family.”

“You guys had sex,” Niel provided. “Come on, I know how that part works.”

“And children. If it was on purpose or not, I don’t know, but our bloodlines mixed heavily. My mother’s a Cuevet.”

“Wait. How can your mother be related to them? Don’t you only have boys?”

“That’s one of the reasons why they never integrated within the Society. Very few of them are okay with how we live. You need to remember that the Society predates a lot of what you’d call societal structures. We made our pact with Him in ancient times. Back then, boys were considered men a whole lot sooner than we do now, so it was never questioned that they’d have sex with whom we consider a boy now, was part of it. It’s remained because it’s part of who we are, what our rituals are.”

“Are you saying you—”

“Yes, they do, Dad.” Niel was literally of two opinions about it, due to that bat. On one side, he thought it aberrant that grown men had sex with boys, even as part of a ritual, but on the other, he had a set of memories where that was acceptable since there was a god involved in it. It wasn’t about men taking advantage of kids. It was about bringing them into the fold, ensuring they had power. Fuck, that first time pretty much ensured they never got sick.

Niel could see why those rituals would remain as they’d always been.

“The Survivors were born in the mid to late nineteenth century. The idea of having sex with a child was repugnant to them, enough they would have rather died than agree to it, and for some reason, He was okay with it, and with them siring children like anyone else. Not just boys. But only the boys can be initiated, even if the bloodline will be passed along with the women.” Olavo rubbed his temple. “We have people trying to figure out why He’d agree to something like that when He wasn’t starving. He’s a god, so He has his reasons, but they are a mystery to us.”

“I guess it isn’t only God who works in mysterious ways,” Stewart said with a chuckle Olavo didn’t share and Niel didn’t feel like indulging.

“But that is why, if I’d known you were part of one of the Survivor’s lines, you and I wouldn’t have had sex after your eighteenth birthday.”

“So before that it was fine?” Niel asked,

“Clearly,” the capybara replied.

“And this is because we had sex at the party?” Niel remembered that, clearly, and he didn’t regret it.

Olavo nodded. “This frat has to be cursed.”

“Nothing you need to know,” Niel told his father.

The copybara took out his phone. He let out a breath. “I need to call my father.”

“Aren’t you worried he’s going to kill you?”

Olavo let out a mirthless laugh. “Oh, he will. But if he finds out what I did from someone in the frat talking to their father, he isn’t going to just kill me. He’s going to make sure I have a couple of years without sex before he does it. While I’m signing my death contract, you should talk with Kuno, Niel. It’s his family’s city. They need to make sure there’s nothing in the medical record that’s going to raise questions.”

“Like blood work showing my body isn’t absorbing any nutrients?”

The copybara sight. “Exactly. And don’t worry about what you tell him. He’s going to find out soon that you do or not.”

Niel nodded and opened the door to Olavo speaking Spanish. He wasn’t surprised to see the assembled men in front of the door and pushed his way through them, wishing Kuno was one of them.

“So,” Limbani said, all smiles, “are you feeling peckish? Maybe I can interest you in some South African sausage?” He started unbuttoning the tail strap and Stewart cleared his throat. The money looked him up and down, licked his lips. “Are you hungry too? It runs in the family, right?”

“No, he’s not hungry,” Niel sighed. “Neither am I. Keep your pants on, Lim. And no, I don’t care what you say. I have more important things to do than have sex right now.”

“I thought you needed it to live,” Limbani replied, pouting.

“What?” Gangan said at the glare Niel gave him. “You announced it in the hall. That isn’t the actions of someone who wants it kept secret.”

Niel sighed. He had a point. “Look. I have things to deal with. Once that’s done. You guys and form a line to fuck me.”

“Niel,” his father warned.

“My life, Dad. I’ll fucking sleep with who I want.” He pushed his way through the other and went up the stairs. He knocked on the door and entered. The margay looked up at him from the end of the bed, legs over a horse’s shoulders and a blissed-out expression on his face. Which vanished the second their eyes met.

“Bert,” he said somberly. “We’re going to have to finish this later.”

“I’m almost...” Bert panted.

“Later. Don’t make me freeze it off.”

“If it helps,” Niel said. “There are half a dozen guys down the stairs who’ll be happy to let you finish with them. And I’m sorry for getting in the way.”

“You wouldn’t look like that if it wasn’t serious. I’ll make it up to you, Bert.”

The horse gathered his clothes and exited, nearly bowling Stewart over. Niel considered slamming the door in his father’s face. Instead, it motioned for him to enter, then closed it.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m magical too, and I was in the hospital where they have my blood and have run tests that aren’t going to make a lick of sense to anyone. Olavo suggested having your family make sure nothing came of that.”

“You’re magical?” the margay asked in disbelief

“Yep.”

“As in one of us? Please tell me we didn’t cause this.”

“It’s not another Thomas,” Niel said. “And I didn’t catch everything Olavo said, but yeah, it’s relating to the Society.”

“How?”

“His grandfather, my actual father, is to blame.” Niel heard his father’s shuffling.

“Okay, I’ll see it’s done, but I’m going to have to explain why.”

Niel gave Kuno the quick rundown of what had happened to him, making sure to send a glare his father’s way anytime he mentioned Jarod. Once he was done, Kuno was on the phone, speaking quietly, and he opened the door to leave and Olavo was about to knock.

“I’m not going to die,” the capybara said, “so long as you’re willing to fly to Argentina with me tomorrow after class.”

Chapter Ten

Niel untangled himself from Olavo, surprised at how awake he felt. He knew how the phrase they used during the orgies work, converting all that sexual energy into actual energy, but he hadn't expected his first attempt at using it to be this successful.

Limbani had been who showed it to him giving Olavo a raspberry when the capybara had said they had more important things to do than that. How Limbani had talked himself onto the jet, Niel still wasn't sure. Olavo had picked him up from his dorm and the monkey had been unhappily waiting on the tarmac at the bottom of the stairs leading into the plane. Something about servants not knowing his place when he pointed to the capybara in the captain's uniform.

It turned out Aquilino was a cousin, not a servant. Also a really good fuck.

Olavo had tried to talk Limbani into returning to the frat, to which the monkey had given the widest grin which had caused Olavo to push him up the stairs. An out of sight Limbani was asking to find out he'd caused trouble. The kind that got the head of the Frathouse to go in front of the dean and explain why the men on the swim team had found themselves suffering from exhaustion after a visit at the frat.

Niel stepped into the large shower room and a hand stopped him from closing the door.

"I will help you wash your back," Aquilino said with that cute Spanish accent

Niel smirked. "Really. My back? Washing?" He looked at the big, hard, cock. "That's what you say you're going to do?"

The capybara returned the smirk. "This comes first, the washing is after. And before that, Olavo mentioned you should practice the *frase* he taught you."

"I practiced the one Limbani showed me."

Aquilino shook his head. "You write it," he tapped the door, "then I fuck you until you are screaming."

Niel stroked the capybara's cock to get precum, then he was tracing symbols on the door. Sigils

and connectors. Unlike Limbani, who'd showed him how to trace the ones for the *orgy phrase*, Olavo had explained why each symbol went where it did, then had him trace them on the tabletop's display until he was satisfied with the result. What he hadn't explained was why he had taught him what amounted to a cone of silence.

Unless it was because he knew this would happen.

The thing Olavo had impressed on him was that he needed to write the sigils first, the five of them as if they were at the points of a pentagram. The positioning didn't have to be exact, but the more precise he managed, the more sound-tight the end result would be. One of the sigils represented air, the other Olavo had explained as 'conversation', implying it wasn't exact. There was one for containing, one for wall, and one that could take a variety of sigils and that would fine tune the insulation. The one Olavo had him learn for that position was a general one for sounds. Then the connectors between them, and the ones linking each along the imaginary pentagram lines.

The finished product, if down properly, would keep anyone from hearing what took place within the confines. Using precum, it would last an couple of hours at most.

"That is adequate," Aquilino whispered in his ear, pressing against his back, the cock pushing his ass cheeks apart.

That part wasn't needed, but it was appreciated. Inanimate objects didn't have the natural resistance to magic people had. Even none magical people had some resistance. It wasn't much, but enough to keep small incidental magic from affecting them unless that was the intent.

In the case of Society magic, horniness was the catalyst. The person performing the magic on someone could send their sexual energy into the *phrase* to activate it, or bypass the natural resistance by making the subject horny and powering it themselves.

It was why a French kiss and a grope was part of the welcoming to any of the Frat's party. It activated the *orgy phrase* that was the mark used to confirm someone was there officially. Kuno had explained all of that years ago, not long after they'd first met. It had marked the start of their friendship.

Or at least it was one of the memories the bat had given him. It was the one Niel chose to accept as true, and Kuno did too.

Niel tried to move, but Aquilino held him in place, the cock slicking the valley with precum.

"If you shove me against the door and I smear the *phrase*—" it was so odd to put the emphasis on the word now "—they're going to hear me all the way to however far below us people are right now."

"We should test that." The capybara reached for the phrase, but Niel stopped him.

"Do you really want to wake Limbani?"

The capybara chuckled. "He will forgive me eventually. But for now, you are the only one I make scream." He moved Niel next to the door and used the opportunity to adjust his cock so that when he pushed, it went in.

Niel groaned at being stretched, then as how long the capybara was. He wasn't Chima big—who was—but fuck was it good.

Niel was panting within half a dozen thrust, and leaking profusely, his cock jumping each time the cock his in his ass pressed against his prostate.

"You enjoy that, do you not?" Aquilino whispered and Niel moaned as the slow pull. Fuck, he might cum just from being fucked. That took skill. "Have I fucked English out of you? Maybe I will fuck

you my language?” he pushed in. “Spanish is the language of lovers, after all.”

“Fuckers,” Niel managed to say, then was moaning too loudly for works.

“What are lovers, but fuckers who know each other so very well?” Aquilino picked up speed and Niel went from moaning to groaning. Fuck, he could feel his cock getting harder. If he wasn’t sure he’d cum from the cock in his ass any moment, he’d be pumping it, because he had to.

“Yes, I can feel it coming in the way your ass is tightening. Are you ready to scream?”

Niel wanted to laugh, like he’d have any choice. Aquilino’s power was to intensify sensations, but it went beyond that of touch, or scents and dipped into emotions too. He could ramp up what someone felt and—

The world exploded with his orgasm. He was barely conscious of the scream that escaped his muzzle due to the intensity of the pleasure that defined him. He was coating the wall, all the wall, the entire jet, the whole worlds. That was how much pleasure there was, he might outshine the sun right now.

Then he was panting and Aquilino held him up. “That is beauty,” he whispered.

Fuck, Niel had thought that what the capybara had caused while he was sandwich between Olavo and Limbani had been strong, but it had been a delightful summer rain I comparison.

“Someone could get addicted to that.”

“Some have,” Aquilino replies sadly. “It is why I am careful with who I share this with.”

Talk about making a guy feel special.

The capybara pulled out, and the loss felt enormous.

“I have fucked you, now I will wash you.” He picked the raccoon up and carried him into the large shower.

* * * * *

The landing was uneventful, due mainly to the fact that Limbani was force to sit and have his seat belt on and that Olavo had seated him out of reach of either him or Niel, so all the monkey could do was pout and waggle his cock invitingly. Then they dressed and exited the jet.

Any hope clothing would be enough to keep Limbani off him so Olavo could explain what Niel should expect was dashed once the door to the limousine closed and the monkey was on him, reaching back to undo the tail strap. Then the pants were off, the legs in the air and a cock in his ass.

Olavo just chuckles when Niel sent a pleading look his way.

* * * * *

Olavo pulled Niel out of the limousine so fast, he wasn’t able to put his pants on. Limbani hurried to exit, but, fortunately for them, the driver exited the car at the same time and the monkey took one look at him and they were both back in the back of the limousine.

Niel hurried to put his pants on once they were inside, to the amusement of the two men watching him. One he recognized as Ezequiel, Olavo’s father, from the pictures on the capybara’s side table.

“I believe that is called a wardrobe malfunction in the United States?” the other man said, chuckling.

“No, we call it an Adesida intervention,” Niel replied, snapping the tail strap in place. “Sirs.” Niel almost offered his hand, then settled for nodding.

“Mister Leslie, I am Ezequiel Medeiros, I welcome you to my home. This is Hilario Cuevas. He

is who as asked to see you. If you will accompany us, we can talk. Olavo, you will not be needed for it.”

“Father, Niel is my friend and I am the one who brought him into the fold. He is my responsibility until all this is settled.”

Hilario spoke in Spanish, which led to a quick conversation between the three of them, that concluded with Olavo accompanying them to a study much different from the one at the frat. Where that one had a sense of utility about it. This one was about luxury. The desk was made of a dark wood polished to a shine. The shelves were filled with books. The places where the walls were exposed had a wallpaper that seemed to be made of textured velvet.

The one thing missing, Niel was pleased to see was a bed. He expected the sex to happen, but he wanted to know what was going on first.

Hilario took one of the seats and Olavo guided Niel to a seat opposite the... was he also an elder? Niel knew the nomenclature within the Society, but the Survivors weren't really part of them, so did they go by different titles?

Ezequiel returned from the liquor cabinet and handed a crystal glass to Olavo, then Niel, who accepted it reflexively then started to object when he realized it was alcohol, but Olavo shook his head.

“Is there a problem?” Ezequiel asked after handing a glass to Hilario and taking his own seat.

“I'm not of drinking age.”

The capybara smiled. “Ah, yes, Americans and their rules. You should start getting used to remembering that you are no longer one of them.”

“It is early to make that claim,” Hilario said, studying Niel. “We only have his claim, that is one of us.”

Niel opened his mouth to protest that he wasn't claiming anything, but Olavo spoke.

“Is this what this is about, father? Have I been away too long? Is my word no longer enough?”

“I mean no disrespect, young Medeiros, but to be one of us is not as simple a thing as to be one of you.”

Niel looked from one to the other trying to understand what was going on. He'd expected a friendly conversation, getting some answers, sex. This was starting to feel like it was more serious. He sipped the glass he held and choked on the burn. How did anyone drink this stuff?

“With all due respect to you, Patriarch Cuevas,” Olavo replied brusquely once Niel stopped choking, “Niel nearly died of starvation because he went two days without sex. The instant he did have some, he felt better.”

“Do you have any evidence of this?”

“Look, he can write and power *frase*, that proves a connection to Him.”

“True, but that simply means he is one of you. This is to determine that he is one of ours.”

“I'm not starving myself,” Niel said. “Although I guess I can go without food for a while if that's going to convince you.”

“I don't believe you can afford to be away from your studies for the weeks it will take for Hilario to be satisfied that way.” Ezequiel had a small smile that made Niel think he was sitting in the middle of more than just his situation.

“Look, by now the Richards should have Niel's medical records, I'll contact Kuno and have them sent to my phone. Niel already said the initial test showed his body wasn't absorbing any nutrients.

Hilario waved the comment aside. “Document mean nothing. Just electricity on the wind. I will not—”

“Okay, can we have a timeout here?” Niel asked. “I have no idea what the problem seemed to be. Honestly, if you don’t want me to be part of whatever you are, I’m fine with it. I have my own live in Minneapolis, now that I know what my condition is, I can manage it. Pretty easily too. The reason I accepted to come here, is because I was led to believe you’d know about the other families like you. Is that true?”

The capybara took his time answering. “Yes, I know them. But do not understand why—”

“I need to know where my father is.”

“I’m sorry,” Ezequiel said, “but wouldn’t he be back in Minneapolis?”

“Not him,” Niel snapped. “My biological father. Jarod Irvine. My dad hasn’t been able to reach him and he has some explaining to—”

Hilario was on his feet, speaking angrily in Spanish. The only word Niel made out was Jarod. Olavo was looking at him in dismay while Ezequiel tried to calm the patriarch down. He gave a nod toward the door and Olavo pulled Niel out.

“What’s going on?”

“You didn’t tell me Jarod was your father.”

“I thought you didn’t know much about the other families.”

“I don’t, but I know that name. Fuck.”

“What? Olavo, what is the big deal?”

“You just claimed to be the Jarod Irvine’s son.”

“That’s who my dad said is my biological father.”

“And that makes you the Irvine Patriarch’s son.”

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know”

“Yeah, well, you’ve just about made yourself the most important Irvine beside him.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Fine, I’m some Patriarch’s son, he’s got to have others. And it isn’t like I’m looking to take over or something.”

“You don’t get it.”

“No duh, sherlock.”

“You aren’t just the son of a Patriarch. You’re the son of THE patriarch. Jarod isn’t a descendant from those who came back from Antarctica. He’s the original one.”

“How is that possible?”

“That I don’t know.” Olavo motioned an attractive panther over and spoke to him in Spanish. “I need to get back in there is only to find out more about your father, so Conrado will take you to a room. He doesn’t speak English, but he’s part of my family’s household. So if you want sex, he’ll be willing. I have no idea how long this is going to take, so just enjoy yourself until I find you again. Okay?”

The capybara didn’t wait for Niel to answer. The volume for the seconds the door was opened showed the tempers had not settled. The panther took Niel arms and smiled, then led him to a bedroom out of a five star hotel with very attentive and skilled staff.

Chapter Eleven

Niel swiped through the images on his phone. A lot were of him playing football, from throwing a ball with his dad to middle-grade games to high school. Touch football with Roland and father and brother on thanksgiving, something an uncle or two would join in. These were all from after his mother died. The Hertz had rallied around him and his dad then. They'd been friends before, being neighbors, but the support they'd provided had brought the two families closer.

He paused on a picture of him and his dad, him with an arm around Niel's neck and giving him a mock noogie. He didn't remember when the picture had been taken—a thanksgiving—but he remembered feeling so close to him at that moment.

Now it felt like a lie. A man trying to impress himself on an impressionable kid.

He rested his head against the headboard. The panther had left once they were done fucking, and Niel had taken a nap and had considered calling his dad to let him know... something about how things were, or weren't, progressing. He didn't even know that.

And he'd found himself wondering why he even wanted to talk to him. It wasn't like his dad had cared enough to tell him the truth, and because of that, Niel had no idea who his father was. Had his dad felt threatened? Was that why he'd hidden the truth? If not for his condition, would he had ever told Niel the truth?

Maybe letting the panther go had been a mistake. Niel could use someone to distract him from his problems. Maybe he should call Limbani. At least with the monkey, there were no secrets. He was unabashedly open about what mattered to him. If nothing else, for that, Niel was glad the monkey had talked his way onto the trip. He hadn't had time to wallow with him around.

A knock came as Niel pulled the number up. He chuckled. Of course, the monkey would be here before Niel called. He was a precog, after all. He opened the door and his greeting died in his muzzle as a capybara smiled at him.

He was in his late teens, Niel guessed, dressed in loose cotton pants and shirt a lot of the people

on the estate wore. He didn't think he'd seen him before.

"Hi?" Niel said.

"Hello, I am Dario." He straightened. "I am here to see the son of Jarod."

Niel stared at the capybara, wondering how he was supposed to respond to such a statement. "Why?" he blurted out.

The question seemed to confuse Dario. Maybe it was a language issue?

"I want to know who you are, not listen to the stories that are told about you."

Stories? It had been what, a couple of hours since he'd learned his father was important to some people and stories were already circulating? Well, he'd give Dario this, his attention hadn't once dropped to Niel's exposed crotch, so he motioned him in.

"I don't know what they're saying about me, but I'm just this ordinary raccoon. There's nothing special about me."

"You are an Irvine," Dario stated, as if that fact alone was enough to elevate Niel to some special status.

"I'm a Leslie, technically." Was he? With Jarod being his father, maybe he should go by Irvine? No. His driver's license had him as Leslie. And did he want some stranger's name, even if he was his father?

This was why he should have known about him. He should have had time to figure out how he felt, not have that dumped on him because he'd had sex with Olavo.

Dario looked at him expectantly.

"Sorry, got overwhelmed by the situation momentarily. I missed what you said."

"Leslie is your name, but your blood is Irvine."

"Sure, but I'm not the only one. Jarod's got to have had more kids. I mean, my dad's his grandson, so that shows there are more." Dario sat on the bed, and instead of staying by the door, Niel joined him.

"There are many children, that is true. But there is only one Irvine, two now."

"How is that possible? If he's like the rest of you, Jarod's not a monk. So he's had his fair share of sex."

The capybara nodded and looked at Niel's cock. "Yes, we all like sex. But we are not like the Society. We are more Bi than Gay, and our children can be women. The stories say Jarod does not have many lovers who are men. He has some, so he can live, but no more. And the stories say that all of Jarod's children are women."

"Really? How can that be? I mean, just on a statistical level, half his kids should be guys. I mean I am a guy."

"Most definitely, you are." The capybara grinned. "I do not know why it is so. The stories do now say. Maybe He does not want so many men who never die that He made it so Jarod has only women."

What gods did went so over his head, Neil changed the subject in the most drastic way he could think of. "What power do you have?"

"I am a Cuevet."

"I figured that part, but I'm wondering what's your power. I mean, you are over eighteen, right? You've gone through your Ceremony of Dominance."

“Ah, no, no. That is something the Society does. We do not.” Dario considered something. “Some do, but it is not because He had told us to.” He grinned. “Sex is fun.”

Niel chuckled. “Then how does it work?”

“I am a Cuevet.” He seemed puzzled by Niel’s incomprehension. “For us, all the family is the same. I can not be hurt.”

“So you don’t feel pain? No one in your family does?”

“I do not feel pain, I do not bleed. I do not get hurt.”

Niel put that together. “You’re what, indestructible?” And he realized the capybara might not have meant his family specifically when he said they were the same. “Are you saying I can’t be killed?”

Either the change was too drastic or now there was a language issue. Niel opened his mouth to explain what he meant, but Dario spoke.

“No, I do not explain it well. Jarod does not grow old. You do not either.”

“I’m going to be a teenager my entire life?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that sucks.”

Dario smiled. “I will be honored.”

Niel started to protest, then reconsidered. Why not? He’d already had enough stuff to think about. “Out of those pants. I’m not letting you suck me off without returning the favor.”

Dario was out of them before Niel was stretched on the bed. Then they both had the other’s cock in his mouth. Dario was a little above average but thicker and with large balls. Trying to get both of them in his mouth was a challenge. But by the sounds the capybara made, he enjoyed the attempt.

* * * * *

The door burst open as Niel was groping Dario. After sucking each other off, there had been solid fucking, and then, instead of leaving, the capybara had snuggled and they’d napped. Niel had just woken and had wanted that cock in him again.

“Up!” Limbani ordered. “Up, now!”

The fact the monkey was dressed gave Niel pause, and before he got over that, Limbani was throwing clothing at him. Okay, something had to be wrong with the world if the monkey wanted him dressed.

“Lim.”

“Get dressed. We need to get ready. Being on time is going to take a lot of work.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dario said something in Spanish and pulled the pillow over his head.

“You heard him,” Niel said. “Get out and let us fuck.”

“That isn’t what he said,” Limbani replied.

Why had it never come up he knew Spanish?

“Fine, it’s what I’m saying.”

Limbani stared at him, got that far away look he did when he looked into the future, then looked stunned. “Imagine that. You can actually change the future. Okay, looks like you aren’t at Roland’s post-ceremony party after all.”

“Fuck that.” Niel was out of bed and dressed before he noticed the smirk on the monkey’s

face. “The future didn’t change, did it?”

“Of course not. I see it and it happens. Now come on. There’s a battle ahead of us.”

* * * * *

“You’re going to have to repeat that,” Niel said over the Spanish being screamed by the capybara, who looked like he was ready to strangle the monkey, not that Limbani looked worried.

“Father,” Olavo tried to calm his father down. “Please calm down. He saw me being here now, therefore it is happening.”

“It’s best I wait until Olavo’s done,” Thomas said, while the elder replied in Spanish, “since he needs to hear this too.”

“I know, father, precognition is not infallible, but Limbani still depends on it.” Far too much, Niel thought, based on the amount of complaining he heard anytime the monkey pulled one of his ‘I’ve seen it, so it’s going to happen’ act. The really annoying thing, as far as the raccoon was concerned, was just how often the monkey was ultimately right. It would be nice for someone to manage to bring him down a peg once in a while.

Limbani put his phone in Olavo’s hand, causing both capybaras to stare at it. It rang as they looked to restart their argument.

“It’s for you,” the monkey said. “You really want to take this call,” he added when Olavo tried to hand it back.

He answered.

“Where the fuck are you?” Niel heard someone yell in the distance in his ear.

“Thomas?” Olavo asked.

On the phone, in Niel’s ear, Thomas sighed, and then came a muffled: “I told you I was calling them.”

“I’m not hearing you ask them what’s going on! Felix nearly died because Olavo wasn’t where he was supposed to be,” Firmin answered in the distance, sounding exactly like Thomas.

Olavo looked at Niel, ear tilted.

“I have Thomas,” he replied. “You have Firmin.”

“What happened to Felix?” Olavo demanded.

“Hang up!” his Thomas ordered. “We don’t need you screaming at them!”

Olavo looked at his phone in surprise.

“Put me on speaking, Niel.”

“We kind of have a situation here,” the raccoon replied, looking at the capybara elder. Niel didn’t think there was anything they could say to assuage Olavo’s father. Niel could understand him. Limbani had barged in on the two of them having sex, and within the Society, that was sort of special. Not to say that the last time the two had been together would be before the start of the semester.

Olavo looked at his father and spoke in Spanish. Niel made out Felix’s name, as well as Firmin. That and what he couldn’t understand was enough to placate the elder, although the tone of the reply made it clear they weren’t done. He left, taking the entourage of family members and household staff with him.

Niel put Thomas on speaker when Olavo motioned for him to do so. “What happened?” the capybara asked.

“Me and Firmin have been collecting the boys for my brother’s ceremony, and when we got to

Felix's, we were jumped by a bunch of Lewistons. We got out, but Felix got hurt." Thomas chuckled. "The asshole got hurt giving us the opening to teleport, so Firmin took us to the frat so you could heal him. The fact you weren't there isn't sitting well with him. You know how close he and Felix have become since Henry."

Olavo sighed. "I have told you numerous times, Thomas, not to rely on me for healing."

"I know; you have your life and all that. And I'm not relying on you. This was just... it was bad. Beyond what I had the energy or knowledge to heal. Fortunately, Feng Peng knew a full phrase and Felix is stable."

"Wasn't that pickup like at his house?" Niel asked. There had been a quick rundown when the get-together had been planned, mainly for the sake of timing and making sure there would be someone there to recharge Thomas. There had been no mention of Firmin helping during that talk.

"Yeah, and there are very few ways the Lewistons could have put the kind of surveillance in his house they'd need to know I've arrived without him knowing about it."

"It would take someone in his family," Olavo stated.

"Yeah. He has been ruffling feathers this last year, with his constant bucking the orders he's given to live the life he wants to, instead of the one the rest of the Chouteau decided for him, so the list of possibilities is long, not that it's really something to deal with at the moment. Are you okay? Firmin was furious when you didn't answer your phone, and I was surprised when the elephant, sorry, I don't remember his name, said you, Limbani, and Niel had flown to Argentina together."

"Something happened at the last party that required us to come here."

"Please," Thomas implored. "Please tell me it wasn't a repeat of what happened to me."

"What?" Niel asked. "You don't want the competition?"

"It happened to you?" Thomas asked after a pause.

"Don't worry, I can't teleport. But I will outlive you."

Olavo raised an eyebrow.

"Dario gave me the rundown. But yes, turns out I am a follower too."

"We're ready," Limbani exclaimed. "I mean, Olavo's naked, but no one will mind, right?"

"What are you talking about? The ceremony is in two weeks." Olavo asked.

"Yeah, about that."

Limbani smirked proudly.

"What's going on?" Niel asked.

"So, Gil and Lau landed four days ago. They said they wanted time to have an actual rest before the fun started, and Chima asked to be picked up yesterday, something about his fathers being on his case about one thing or another. Yating's here already. With so many of the guys here, Roland's jumping at the bit to finally top everyone."

"He does know it doesn't have to us who perform his ceremony," Olavo said.

"Yeah, but he's dead set on me being His representative, and I'm not going it with a bunch of strangers. Honestly, it took me nearly two years to get comfortable with the idea of me and him having sex. Our first time is going to be with the guys I consider my family."

"What about Trevor and Madoc?"

"They'll be there," Limbani answered, his excitement getting the better of him.

“You heard the monkey,” Thomas said with a chuckle. “I already called Madoc, and he said he can get his boss to give him early time off. I haven’t been able to reach Trevor yet, but if Limbani says he’ll be there, I trust his visions more than my uncertainty. Which basically means me or Firmin are picking the three of you up. I just need the all-clear that there’s someone waiting for me in my room.”

“What room?” Niel asked.

Thomas laughed. “Come on, Niel. Did you think I had to fly when an elder wanted to see me? Ezekiel was the first among the elder to offer me refuge and have a room set aside just for me.”

Olavo smiled. “You know, I think your timing couldn’t be better. My father could use some sex with his favorite teleporter.”

Chapter Twelve

“So,” Niel said, then hesitated. “I kind of have two questions.” Olavo was the only other in the limousine. Limbani had tried to get in, but he’d been bribed with three guys to ride in his own car.

“Only two?” the capybara replied with a smirk.

“Okay, I have a lot more, but two I’d really liked answered now. First off, why are we driving to this hotel? Thomas said his room.”

“His room is in that hotel.”

“That seems inconvenient.”

“What it is is secure. My father respects Thomas, and trusts him as much as he will trust anyone, but the possibility exist he can be coerced. Having his room there, away from our home ensures that if anyone tries to use him to get to us, they cannot appear in a surprise attack.”

“Okay, I guess that works. Then my second question. Why did we fly?”

“So we could come to Argentina?”

Niel shook his head. “Why did we fly instead of having someone teleport us here?”

“And by someone, you mean Thomas.”

“Or someone else. I’m not picky.”

Olavo studied him. “Didn’t Roland explain things?”

“If you mean that Thomas can teleport, of course he did.”

“And that’s all he did? He never mentioned that he is the only one who can do it? That before him it was believed to be impossible?”

Niel shook his head, surprised. “Does that mean others will be able to now that he showed it can happen?”

“That isn’t how it works. We don’t get to decide who gets what power, only He does. Thomas does show us he can happen, but He may decide that Thomas is the only to ever have that power. Or

Roland may get it once he walks out of his ceremony, or someone else, some day may. There is no way for us to know.”

“Why, to be the only person with that kind of power,” Niel trailed off, wondering if he could stop himself from abusing something like that.

“There is one other with his power, quite literally. Do you remember Firmin?”

“He’s the shape shifter, right?” Because he’d been at the frat a few times when Niel visited Roland there, the bat had made sure he was part of his memories, but even there they hadn’t interacted much.

“Body thief. He can only take other’s shapes, but if he copies one of us, he also copies their power. He and Thomas have grown friendly enough after the Henry debacle that he has allowed him to continue copying it, but that has not been advertised. There have been other attempts at copying his power, but he and his family are careful not to let it happen.”

“Is that why those Lewistons are after him?” it had been explained only broadly as being a family problem, but if teleportation was that rare, it made sense.

“No, but if Roland hasn’t told you the details, I don’t think it’s my place to do so.”

“So, I guess us flying was because he was too busy with more important people.”

“More that I don’t want to abuse a friend, and flying is enjoyable.”

The copybara was right about that.

* * * * *

The hotel felt more like a resort, with only three floors, but spread wide on both side of the main entrance. A monkey with black and golden fur in a bellhop suit right out of an old movie opened the car’s door for them, then greeted Olavo by name, that being the only part of the short conversation Niel understood.

“We own the hotel,” Olavo explained. He spoke with a clerk, a tapir in a light dress, and she handed him a card.

“Don’t you have a master code?” Niel asked. “With owning the place and all?”

“This might not be the United States, but we still have privacy laws, only the manager has a passcode.” They rode the elevator to the third floor. Olavo grinned. “And my uncle isn’t on the property today.” Olavo opened the door and the sound of sex was loud.

“I guess Limbani got here before us.”

“No.” Olavo entered and Niel followed. “This is why the driver of the car Limbani is in has orders to drive for an hour more than needed to get here.” Olavo’s father had a rat pinned to the bed and was fucking him hard. An otter on a plush chair watching, looking annoyed. “Felix, what are you doing here?” Olavo asked.

“No one told us there would be someone here to recharge him.”

“Thomas knew.”

“Well he didn’t say.”

Niel almost pointed out that Thomas was right there, on the bed getting plowed and sounding like he was loving it, but he remembered what Olavo said, and now it made sense that other voice he’d hear through his phone had sounded like Thomas.

It was Firmin being fucked on the bed.

Olavo took off his pants. “Then it’s good you’re here. I can make sure you are healthy.”

The otter smirked. “What, you don’t trust the work one of your frat boys did? Are you telling me you aren’t making sure they are perfect? Whatever happened to the great Olavo, eventual ruler of Argentina with all his needed degrees to get there and wanting perfection out of everyone?”

“You will speak to my son with the respect he is due,” the elder capybara said, not slowing.

Felix rolled his eyes. “I’m going to speak to my frat brother however I want. If he doesn’t like it, he’s welcome to make sure I can’t talk.” The otter smirked, pulling his legs up.

“You know very well fucking you is better to heal.” Olavo put the legs over his shoulder. “Which is a good thing I have brought Niel with me. Niel, why don’t you shove your cock in this impertinent otter’s mouth before my father feels the need to make him regret ever opening it?”

Niel grinned at the otter. Felix opened his muzzle to protest, and the raccoon filled it with his cock. Then Niel got to experience the elder Medeiros and was left considering that if older men were as skill as he was, he’d have to spend more time with them from now on.

* * * * *

Niel stood there, trying to decide what this had felt like as Firmin in Thomas’s body dropped onto the bed and Limbani started fucking him. There had been no talk of what to expect, and he’d wondered if the others were setting him up for something, but... he tried to come up with some way to describe it and couldn’t come up with anything.

He’d been standing in the hotel room in Argentina (I’m thinking we’re going to have to refine where they actually are, Argentina is on the large side) holding on to Firmin, alongside Olavo and Limbani, then he was in this room. No fading in and out, not vertigo, no changes whatsoever. At worst, he there there was a moment of blankness between one location and the other, but he wasn’t even sure of that. Maybe he’d just blinked.

The door opened and a red panda asked something in what Niel guessed to be Chinese. Limbani replied in the same language—how many did he know and why hadn’t the monkey bragged about it? He made out Hertz, then the panda was gone.

Niel took in the room. It was large and had a definite North American feel to it. Bed, dresser, side tables. A door lead to a good size bathroom; small when compared what the Medeiros had but he’d been in friend’s house with smaller ones.

Olavo offered for him to have a good at the rat sprawled on the bed but he shook his head. Even knowing he was Firmin, he still looked like his best friend’s brother and until he and Roland talked about what was allowed, he didn’t feel right fucking a copy of him.

So he pulled his phone and looked through videos of the team’s plays that had made it online.

His view was interrupted by the door slamming open, then he was on the bed, pushed the from the impact and being hugged tight.

“Fuck I missed you,” Roland said, then kissed him hard.

Niel hugged his best friend and kissed him back. Hands on his ass, bare ass. Niel was naked, since Firmin had teleported them as soon as they were done fucking, but he’d expected Roland to be busy with something and dressed.

Niel pushed his friend away enough he could look him upper body over. “You’ve put on even more muscle than I expected. You didn’t look this buff in the last video.”

“Do you have any idea what’s possible with magic? I mean, noting like what Madoc gives, but still. And I’ve had a lot of time between that, the sex, and teaching the guys my age football. We’ve had

to settle on touch football, although in the local dialect it translates more to grope football, which is a better description anyway. We're not actually good at football, but we have the groping down."

"Breathe!" Niel exclaimed with a laugh. "I'm not leaving anytime soon, no need to fill in weeks of events right now."

Roland hugged him again. "I'm so glad you made it. Oh! I need to introduce you to someone." The rat pulled Niel up and in the doorway were Eric and Nadia Hertz, dressed in light shirts for Roland's father and a light summer dress for his mother. Niel was suddenly very aware of his nudity and pulled the rat before him.

"Can I get something to wear?" he whispered.

Roland laughed. "Come on, you think you're the first naked guy my parents have seen? We've been here for two years. Anyway you've got to me Milton(I checked and couldn't find this name used before, but feel free to change it, or to remove the baby brother. The option was in the outline so I decided to go with it), my brother."

Nadia held a tiny bundle in her arms and she beamed as Niel looked at him.

"It's goping to be so cool teachign him everything I know," Roland said.

"Maybe you'll wait until he'd older for some of that," Nadia said. "Like once he's able to hold a ball?"

"I can start teaching him the theory before that, mom." Niel wanted to laugh at the adoration on Roland's face as he looked at his baby brother. Hopefully there wouldn't be any of the awkward longing in this relationship. Niel didn't feel like going through the memories the bat had left him of that part of Roland teen years. His best friend had never openeid up to him about that in reality.

"It's good to see you again, Niel." Eric offered his hand, looking Niel over appreciatively and the raccoon blushed as he shook it. "I believe I should welcome you into His family. Thomas said you were a follower before he left to pick up the others, but he didn't give any details, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, seems there's a group of them who keep to themselves, and my biological father was one, my dad can't have kids so he went to him." As normal as it was for men in the society to have sex with their relatives—and he had the memories to support that, Niel wasn't ready to go into who his biological father was just yet. "Also turns out that because I had sex with someone else related to that group, I'm not officially one of them and I need sex the way I used to need food."

"So, no difference then," Roland said, pulling himself away from his baby brother.

"No, like I'm going to starve if I don't have sex at least once a day."

Roland grinned. "Oh, that is so cool. Have you eaten today yet?"

Niel opened his mouth to repeat he no longer needed food, but caught the mischievousness in his friend's eyes. "You are up to something."

"You're running out of time before that ass goes off limit."

"You said—" Niel closed his muzzle. He wasn't talking about that in front of Roland's parents. There were things you didn't say, no matter how open about sex a family was. "We're going to need a room. I'm not fucking you in front of your family."

* * * * *

Niel was back in the room he'd arrived in and it was getting crowded. Only the bed and the space before it were free of people. Chair were pulled in and everyone sat, talking and groping each other, even Nadia was keeping Eric erect. Teasing was the order of the day, keeping everyone ready for

the next arrival, not that anyone was just when Thomas would arrive, so there was also a betting pool as to who would cum first, and who would lose the battle of will and start fucking. It was no surprise that Limbani was the favorite for both, not that the monkey seemed to want to move onto anything else just yet.

A group appeared before the bed. Three rats and a tiger with pale fur and golden stripes. The older of the rats stepped forward, while Thomas stood there looking around.

“Nadia,” the rat said, hugging her, careful of her bundle.

“Trevor, it’s so good to see you again.”

Instead of a hug, Trevor kissed Eric hard, and stroked the leaking cock.

“Okay,” Thomas said. “Stop gawking at my dad making out with Trevor. I’m the one who expended all that energy getting them here, someone come and fuck me.”

Limbani was on the rat and the fell back on the bed. Niel was too stunned by how blasé Roland’s mother was at another playing with her husband’s cock. He’d heard stories, but he hadn’t expected them to be quite this true.

Eric grunted, then came over Trevor’s hand and arm. Nadia took the hand away and licked the cum off.

“I guess that’ll do as a welcome for now,” she said. She noticed Niel and smiled. He hurried to look away.

The golden tiger offered Niel his hand. “Niel, right?” unlike every guy in the room, the tiger was dressed.

“And you’re Paul, right?” Other than Thanksgivings, the two hadn’t interacted much over the years, being best friend with siblings who avoided each other because of how badly they wanted to pull the other in bed for hot sex.

“How are you doing? I hear you didn’t run off like a certain rat we know.”

Niel chuckled and gave a run down of what had happened to him. Not long after he was done, the rats on the bed were done too and Thomas stopped any from starting on him. “After I’ve done the introductions, we can get back to the sex.” He pulled the rat and Niel stood. “Niel, Madoc, Madoc, my brother’s best friend, Niel.”

Madoc was built, more muscular than Niel had expected from the stories Roland told him. The rat made others into muscle houses, not himself, but he looked like someone had chiseled him out of marble.

Instead of speaking, the rat grabbed Niel by the shoulders and turned him. The ass grope didn’t come, instead he finished the one eighty.

“How much can you lift?” Madoc asked.

“No,” Roland said. “You aren’t spending time going over what you can do to him.” He grabbed Madoc by the arm and pulled him to the bed. “I need my booster shot because it’s going to be months before I let you give me another one.”

Thomas shook his head and chuckled. “He is going to be impossible once he starts topping.”

“Give him a week,” Gilbert said, “and he’ll be asking to be fucked again.”

“Thomas, it’s so good to have you home again,” Nadia said and hugged him.

“It’s great to be back, Mom. And no vanishing for a while. The next two weeks are for Roland and my family.”

“What about your family?” she asked. “When are you going to give me a grand son?”

“Mom,” Thomas whined.

“Come here Son,” Eric said and pulled Thomas against him, kissing him hard. Thomas stiffened, before kissing back, then ending the kiss.

“Sorry dad, it’s still...”

Eric’s smile had sadness in it. “I understand.”

“Alright everyone,” Nadia called. “Just a reminder that for those of us who will not be taking part in the ceremony, there is food and refreshment in the dining room.” She paused. “Niel, can you still eat?”

Niel remembered how his last solid meals had gone down.

“He should stick to liquids for the moment,” Olavo said. “His body will have to get used to dealing with food it can’t process.”

“Does that mean I’ll be able to eat and not... you know?”

“Yes, you don’t have to worry about that.”

Niel smiled. He hadn’t realized how much the idea of never tasting food again had hurt until now.

“Good, with that settled,” Nadia said, “we should assemble there and leave my son to finish this so they can move to the ceremonial chamber and he can be made a man.”

“Mom, I am a man, I’m eighteen.”

“In the Society, you become a man once you have your Ceremony of Dominance, young man. You are the one who insisted on being picky about who led it. There were plenty of—”

“Fine,” Roland whined. “I’ll be a man in a couple of hours then.”

“You think it’s going to take that long?” Limbani asked.

“Oh, I’m going to make it take that long,” the rat replied. “I have been waiting for this for way too long. I am going to milk it for all it’s worth.”

“I forget,” the monkey said, grinning. “You haven’t gone through any of the ceremonies. It’s going to be fun to watch.”

Chapter Thirteen

(I've put the section about them transitioning back to CH12, although I didn't write it. It didn't quite work as the start of this chapter, and it's worth keeping if only for establishing in the book that Firmin is actually a badger)

The dining room was packed with guys. A lot of red pandas around Niel's age, older red pandas, one of which Eric had said was Yahui and Yating's father. He'd met the twins back in Minneapolis. But hadn't interacted with either, Yahui wasn't even in any of the memories the bat had given him. Someone had mentioned he'd been hidden, but that had been when Niel was sorting which were the real memories from the fakes ones and how he felt about some of them being fake instead of real and a lot of what took place after that was fuzzy.

There were others, a deer, a mongoose, a feline Niel hadn't been able to identify due to how quickly they'd crossed path. As far as he'd understood, all those near his age were friends of Roland, while the adults were friends of the Hertz as a family.

Niel hadn't felt as isolated as he'd feared. For all the Chinese he had spoken, a lot of those who talked with him spoke English. This was one of the times when he wished he'd known what would happen in his future, so he could have picked Chinese instead of German as his elective in school. At least here he'd have gotten to practice it.

Most of them already knew who Niel was; Roland had talked about him a lot, and they were curious as to who the mysterious best friend was. Another surprise was how none of them turned the conversations into sexual advances. His interaction with the Sigma Theta Gamma had left him with the sense Society men needed to exert their will on their cocks not to start shoving it into orifices. Limbani was the worse, but only by degree, not because he was the only one.

When he felt comfortable enough with a handful of Roland's friends he brought that up and he was assured that if not for how special today was, Niel would have been bent over a chair within

minutes of arriving. Today was Roland's ceremony, so they were all keeping themselves for him.

So, Niel decided, they were just like the frat led him to think. Not that he'd ever complain about it.

Paul was pulled into the conversations. It seemed that Thomas's best friend was just as mysterious to them as Niel had been. Paul seemed amused by the attention and answered questions.

He'd known Thomas since they were kids. When to school together and it wasn't until Thomas got his power that their lives stopped intersecting as much. Thomas had left the university, while Paul had been offered a scholarship to study at the San Francisco University and he'd accepted. It meant he spent more time with Madoc and Trevor than Thomas these days, but even if he hadn't been with them, Paul added with a chuckle, he would have found a way to come and offer Thomas all the support he could on his brother's big day.

"Support," one of the pandas, Liuxian, snickered in accented English. "That is what they call being there to be fucked when Roland is here for all of us?"

Paul gave a coy smile behind his glass.

"He's here for Thomas, not Roland," Niel explained.

"We are all here for Roland. He will end the ceremony with His strength, will we all be his to dominate. Then we will all enjoy one another." The panda looked Niel and Paul over. "Many times."

"It's okay," Paul told Niel, who was about to protest. "I was there for two of Roland's ceremony. I know how he'll be. But you should change your expectations when it comes to me. I'm not in the habit of having sex with strangers, which we still are."

"But you are a man," One said. Niel couldn't recall his name. "You are a friend. You have sex with friends."

"You have sex with enemies too," Paul grumbled in his drink and Niel tightened his lips to keep from smiling. He wished he had a drink to hide behind, but the broth Nadia had offered him was still making its way through him and he didn't want to risk adding anything to that. "I'm friends with Roland and Thomas," He said, then added. "And Olavo, Trevor, Madoc, Gilbert, Laurence, Kuno, Felix, Firmin, Yating, Yahui, Chima, Hubert, Jacques," he sighed, "and even Limbani. But I would appreciate it if the rest of you were to not make any advances on me. Always telling you no will ruin the mood."

"How can you not want sex with me?" the deer asked, taking off his pants. People had arrived in various states of undress and only too off what they had if they had a reason. Like now, Niel figured.

Paul looked him over and gave a shrug. "I don't know you."

Niel looked the deer over and thought Paul was being overly picky. The guy had a nice, thick cock.

"I will introduce you to me." The deer took his cock in hand, stroking it hard and took a step toward Paul who stepped back, looking annoyed. Niel interjected himself.

"If he isn't interested, you leave him be."

"Will you get to know me?" the deer asked Niel. He was fully hard, his cock had doubled in length, going from nice to impressive.

"Happily, but that doesn't mean you can push yourself on anyone. Even if he's a Friend of the Society."

Behind him, Paul let out a long sigh. "I appreciate the intervention, Niel, but this isn't going to work. I've lost track of the number of times I've had to explain this to one of them, and even those who

respect it, still think it's weird." He looked at the deer. "I am not interested in having sex. It is not about you, it is about me. I understand that you think it's weird that I want to get to know someone before I'll get in bed with them, I deal with that even outside the Society, but it's how I am. Having you insist you can change my mind will not work."

The deer opened his mouth, but one of the pandas spoke sharply in Chinese. Niel turned of face Paul. "I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"I sort of thought like them."

The tiger smiled. "At least you didn't offer to prove me wrong. You have no idea how many guys think like Xinya over there. That if they show me what they're packing I'll suddenly see how wrong I am. It took Madoc threatening to stop fuckign the guys at the gym he works at before they'd leave me alone when I visit."

Niel question about that was interrupted by a red panda running it, leaking cum from his cock and ass. "Incoming!" was all he said before a muscular rat was in the room. Roland had a nearly demented look on his face as he took in the crowd and that was not improved as a grin slowly formed on his lips.

Niel had seen pictures of quads who had rabis and, other than not foaming at the mouth and hard cock that looked bigger than what Niel remembered it to be, he could wonder if Roland might not have caught it.

The cheer that went up as Roland pounced on the red panda, the impact pushing him against the wall, and then proceeded to fuck him told Niel that he was the only one surprised by what was going on.

"An orgy," Niel muttered. "I was told this was going to be an orgy. I know what those are like. And it isn't—" Roland roared and was out of the panda's ass his cock still pulsing cum. "—this."

His best friend looked over the people assembled. No one was wearing pants anymore and they all looked eager for what was coming. So Niel was utterly not surprised when Roland's gaze ended up fixed on him and with hungry, feral, look in his eyes.

He stepped back as Roland stalked in his direction, fighting his instinct to turn and run as fast as he could. Not only was this his best friend, but he'd seen the result of running. The panda might be grinning, but that had looked rather violent.

"There's plenty of other guys more than willing, Roland," he said. "Why don't you work this off on one of them, and then come find me?" At least, Neil thought, no one was shoving him at the sex hungry entity before him. Although far too many look amused. When this was done, he was having a talk with Kuno about properly explaining to him what stuff like a post ceremony orgy entailed. And he was no longer accepted the casual 'oh you know how those go', his friend had answered then he'd questioned how Roland's previous ones had gone.

Niel leg caught on a chair and before he could side step it, that distraction was enough for Roland to cover the distance between them. Then he was on his back with a massive rat on top of him.

It should have been a familiar position. How often had Roland tackled him and they'd end up like this? Although, usually there had been football equipment between them, except in some of the memories the bat gave both of them, of growing up far more sexual, then there had been naked tackles.

He was the way Roland was still over him, eyes fixed on his. They were his friend's eyes, but

also not. Niel couldn't name what he felt as Roland looked at him.

"Mine," Roland mouthed, then he took Niel's legs and had them over his shoulders. The smile as Roland pushed his cock in was less feral, more... welcoming? Then it was gone, and Niel was fucked. It wasn't the violent fuck the panda had received, but it was forceful; the tackle going full in.

Niel would have groaned at the corniness of the thought, but Roland's cock hit his prostrate, hard, and there was an entirely different reason for his groaning. Then Roland roared and was out, leaving Niel wishing it had been longer. He hadn't known Roland could top this hard and he hoped it wasn't going to be a one time thing. He wobbly got to his feet in time to see the rest of those who'd been part of Roland's ceremony enter, Thomas in the lead. He looked particularly proud even if he walked with an odd gait. Considering how Niel's ass felt after this quick pounding and Roland's promise he was going to make it last for those in the ceremonial chamber, maybe he had a reason for it.

When Paul took Thomas's hand and they started making out against the wall, Niel realized he didn't have to wait to get fucked again. Anyone Roland had done was fair game, and Roland had done all there ceremonial attendee. There was a margay who owed him an explanation, and right now he was going to settle for a cock up his ass instead.

* * * * *

"Fuck," Niel groaned as he untangled himself from the sleeping men on the floor. Now he knew why the carpet was so plush and comfortable. But the cleaning bill had to be murder.

He'd gotten his wish, and then some. After Roland had gone through all the men, his hunting had been more targeted and Thomas, Eric and Niel had been at the top of the repeats, or that's how it seemed to him.

He stumbled around the people and out into the kitchen where Nadia and other women were cooking. The clock said thirteen sixteen and Niel tried to work out the date. "Are we Saturday or Sunday?"

"Sunday, honey," one of the panda replied. "There is food on the table in the other room."

He was in the room and the smells had him at the long counter before he remembered he shouldn't eat right now. Actually, he realized nothing bad had happened from the broth, other than he needed to take a leak.

That taken care of he returned to more people in the large room. Some were obviously from the sex room, by the way their fur was matted with cum, but more than Niel expected were well dressed, or had clean fur, or weren't men. After the frat and Olavo's home, it was a little jarring to see such an even distribution between men and women in one room.

"Hubert," he called, seeing the collie. "Is this the norm? Or the exception?"

The collie took a few seconds to look around blearily. "People do tend to dress."

"I mean the men and women."

He shrugged. "Probably the exception, but it varies a lot from family to family."

"It is normal for the Xu and Jian to mix," a red panda said. She was around his age, but dressed and a woman. She gave a small bow. "I am Guan Shu. My family acts as a transition... no, middle ground, between the Xu and their counterpart within the Convent."

Humbert groaned and walked off toward the buffet.

"Do you know why he reacted that way?" he asked.

"Some of the Society families are not friends with the Convent, it is possible his family is such. I

do not know.”

“Why would they object to a convent?”

She smiled. “No, the Convent. They are the woman counterpart to the Society.”

“So He also deals with women? I was told His followers were only men.”

“They are. The Convent follow the Holy Lady of the Womb (if you can think of something better, please change it).”

“That’s a mouthful,” Niel said, grinning.

“It is considered is respectful for those who do not worship Her directly to say her name.”

“And you don’t?”

“My family assist. I was not one of the fortunate to become one of Her follower, but I still have my role to play.”

“Here,” Hubert said, handing Niel a plate with sausage and eggs on it and a mug of coffee. Niel took it and found himself at a loss as to what to do with it. “Aren’t you hungry?” the collie asked, digging into his food, he had the same, but a lot more.

“Not really. I guess you didn’t hear. I life off sex now, and at least for a while, actual food doesn’t agree with me. It’s a transition thing.”

“Cool,” someone said behind Niel as a hand grabbed his plate. “I didn’t want to deal with the crowd.” Roland started eating before he was done talking. “I didn’t realize how hungry I’d get fucking everyone. Multiple times.” He grinned at Niel.

“I guess that’s going to be your power now, fucking all the guys,” Niel said.

Roland snorted. “Don’t do that while I’m eating, I thing I have food up my nose now. And fucking guys isn’t a power, it’s the norm for us. What about you? What’s your power, now that you’re one of us?”

“I…” Niel hesitated. He didn’t want to talk about not aging with so many people around.

“Come on,” Roland said with a grin. “It can’t just be living off sex. That’s like our thing, minus the living off it part.”

“There’s a *phrase* for that,” Hubert said.

“There’s a *phrase* for everything,” Roland replied, “that doesn’t count.”

“I don’t know everything yet. I was hoping the Cuevas would be able to give me more information while I was in Argentina, but you went and had your ceremony early.” Niel grinned at his best friend. “Plans had to changed.”

“Like you’re complaining.”

“I’m not, but it means we’ll have to wait on more information.”

“Who are those Cuecas?” Hubert asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard the name before.”

Niel cursed inwardly and searched the room. He located Olavo, but he was in a conversation with an older red Panda, and it didn’t seem to be going well. No going to him for a rescue. What could he say and not expect to get in trouble?

“They’re a family living in Argentina, they’re like me that they are His followers too, but aren’t like the Society.”

“Are you talking about the Orrs?” a red panda asked, looking eager.

“Who are the Orrs?” Niel asked.

“No one you—”

“They’re the people Madoc and Trevor work for,” Roland said and ignored the glad the collie gave him.

Okay, so not a subject to bring up again. “How about you excuse me? I need to ask Olavo something.”

He walked off before Roland could protest. The capybara and Red Panda spoke Spanish. And while the voices were low, the tone was tense. Okay, maybe that was a bad idea too.

“Can we assist you?” the panda asked, a friendly smile suddenly on his face.

Olavo didn’t look happy Niel was there, but it was too late to vanish. “I was wondering if you’d heard from your family. One of them said they’d look into where my father is?”

The capybara closed his eyes, looking pained.

“Why what a wonderful idea,” the panda said. “You should contact your father, young Medeiros, it would be unbecoming of you to leave your friend in such a distressed state.”

Fuck, what had Niel walked into? When Olavo opened his eyes Niel mouthed ‘sorry’.

“It’s not your fault.” He took his phone and called, then he was speaking in Hushed Spanish, occasionally glaring at the panda. Then he frowned. “Are you certain?” He asked in English. “They’ve located him,” Olavo said. “In France.”

“What’s your dad doing in France?” Roland asked. He stood a few steps away, a full place in hand.

Chapter Fourteen

“A week,” Niel said, trying not to make it a grumble.

“It’s not going to be that bad,” Olavo said. “I’ll even pay for a first class seat for you.”

“Why not use the jet?” he looked for Roland, but he’d run off. Great, abandoned by his best friend when he could really use someone to talk with. Fuck. Why couldn’t things just line up for once?

“The jet isn’t mine, and my father only lets me use it to go home.”

“Right.”

“What’s wrong?” Olavo asked.

“Nothing,” Niel replied.

“Niel, I know you well enough to know when something’s bothering you.”

“It’s just this whole thing. Only a few days ago I find out my father’s not my father. At the same time as I find out I’m part of your faction. And now that I know where my father his, I have to wait until next weekend to go see him because I can’t miss classes.”

“I can arrange for you to have a flight today. That should put you in France at some point tomorrow. If you leave the next day, that has you back in Minneapolis by the middle of the week. Do you really have anything you can’t miss?”

“I have a test Tuesday morning. That’s about the only thing. Coach still thinks I’m out with whatever put me in the hospital and I can probably use the fact his little hazzing to blame to keep him from being pissed at me when he finds out I wasn’t back at practice the instant I felt better.” Niel sighed. “It’s just this entire thing. I know it’s stupid for me to be impatient, but I want to speak with my biological father, atr least find out why he never contacted me. Dad never forbid him or anything. I just want this deal with now.”

“Maybe having to wait is a good thing,” the capybara said. “You don’t sound like you even know how to feel. Take a few weeks to consider things.”

“Fuck that,” Roland said, returning with a confused Thomas. “Why wait when you have instant

transportation right here?"

"Do you need to head home now?"

"France," Roland said, which seemed to confuse Thomas more.

Niel came him a rundown of his situation.

"So, you can get him there," Roland said, "he talks with the guy and then you take him home and he's going to end up there before Olavo."

Thomas sighed. "Roland, do you have any idea how big France is? I have two landing spots there. Just getting Niel to his father from there could take longer than him flying there."

"Where does that man live?" Roland asked.

Niel looked at Olavo who consulted the file his father sent.

"It's an address in Boiseuil," the capybara answered, then he was reading something.

"That sounds familiar," Roland said.

Thomas nodded. "Can you google it, Olavo? My phone is in my pants which are somewhere in this house. I think the last time I saw them was two days ago."

The capybara projected the map over his phone. "That's Boiseuil," he pointed a highlighted dot.

Thomas cursed. "And that's where Victor's living." He pointed at another dot nearly touching Boiseuil this zoomed out. "Just outside Poulenat. Boiseuil is where he goes to do his grocery shopping."

Niel looked at he map in disbelief. "And I'm guessing one of those landing spot is at your brother's house. That's quite the coincidence."

"Next to it," Thomas said. "And it has to be, because there is no way He can have a hand in this. Vic lives in a Practitioner safehouse."

"What's a Practitioner?" Niel asked when no one elaborated.

"Oh, just wait until you met Grant," Roland said with a grin before running off. "I'm going to see of Mom and Dad want in on visiting Vic!"

"Please don't let him have super speed," Thomas implored. "He's already impossible to keep track of."

* * * * *

"When you said next to it," Niel said, looking around at the bales of hay and farm equipment, "I was expecting a guest house or something. Not a barn."

"Vic isn't comfortable with having Thomas just appear in his house," Roland said. Thomas nodded. "You need a recharge?"

"I'll be good," Thomas answered, sounding out of breath. "Just don't ask me to teleport until after I've had sex." He headed for the small door in the larger double door.

Stepping outside, Niel was surprise to see the sun close to the horizon on the east, so morning. He was going to be multiple jet lagged at this point. Were they still Sunday? Where was the international date line? The other surprising thing was the farm house the two rats were heading for and the large field of grapes vanishing in the distance.

He whistled in astonishment. Victor lived here?

He rejoined Thomas and Roland halfway to the house and just as woman exited it, along with a badger.

"Hey Jacques!" Niel called out. He was another of the frat brother the bat had given a passing

history between Niel and him. They wouldn't be friends, but they were more than acquaintances.

"Thomas!" the badger exclaimed, then ran at them, hugging the two rats. The other rat trailed behind him, a smile on her face. Jacques offered Niel his hand. "Niel. I'm glad to see you, although the circumstances aren't great. Your ride to Boisseuil should be here in an hour or so."

Niel nodded. "They could be worse. I could have half of you running around the country trying to catch me."

"I will never live this down, will I?" Thomas said before hugging the woman. "How's Victor doing today?"

"It's one of his better days, although he'd letting the twins distract him from your arrival." She offered her hand. "Hello Niel, I don't know if you remember me, I'm Orinda Hertz."

He shook it. "Victor's wife, I remember you from a few of the thanksgivings."

"I need you to be careful around Victor, after what happened to him, he isn't comfortable around men he doesn't know, especially not Society men."

"I'm not—" Niel started, but cut his explanation of how he wasn't the same sort. What did it matter? Whatever had happened to Victor had been traumatic enough to cause that. It wasn't his place to make himself an exception.

She led them inside. The door opened to a large kitchen and eating area, with the living room visible where another rat and a collie were trying to round up two kids.

"Wow, they've grown," Niel said. The last time he'd seen the twins at a thanksgiving gathering, they were still on all fours. His voice caught the attention of the children who ran toward them. The collie followed them with the rat behind him, but wary.

"Niel, good to see you again," Hubert said. Like Jacques, he was someone the bat had put in Niel's memories. Just enough they weren't strangers.

"Hi Vic," Thomas greeted his brother cautiously.

The older brother startled at being addressed. "Hi, Thomas."

"This is Niel," Orinda said. "Stewart's son."

"He's one of them." Victor looked about ready to run, or pass out.

"Breathe, honey. Remember to breathe. Nothing's going to happen. Jacques and Hubert are here. You're safe."

Niel looked at Tomas. What the fuck had happened to Victor? He didn't remember the man being an action hero of anything, but he certainly didn't have anything like this fear at the last gathering. Especially not when it was Thomas and Roland who seemed to set him on edge more than Niel.

"I know. It's just... I'm sorry Roland, I know it was an important day for you, but..." Victor started shaking.

"I get it Vic," Roland answered. "Maybe we should take this outside and let you play with the twins?"

"No, no," Victor hurried to say, although it sounded forced. "You're family. I'm not going to kick you out."

Orinda ushered the twins away from Niel. "Come on you two, why don't you take daddy to the living room and play with him."

Niel opened his mouth to ask, but Jacques shook his head.

"How are things back home?" Thomas asked Hubert, heading for the coffee machine on the

counter. "Any improvements?"

The collie rolled his eyes. "Things are never going to change while that curmudgeon is in charge. He has his head so fucking deep in the past all he sees is the mistakes that were made and how they weight our family down, like anyone other than him gives a fuck about it. World war two was a fucking century ago. The whole country paid for what happened then. They learned and move on, my fucking elder should do the same." He paused. "No disrespect intended."

Jacques smacked the back of the collie's head. "No one here cares that you're disrespecting your elder."

"Says the guy living here when his family's only a few hours away." The collie looked at his hand like he was planing on using it.

"No hitting Jacques through the furniture," Orinda warned.

"Can someone open the door for me?" Hubert asked casually.

Niel looked around for a clue as to what was going on. He remembered Hubert being strong, but he couldn't recall what Jacques' power was. No one seemed to take the request seriously so Niel didn't move, only accepting the coffee that was offered.

"And unlike you, my family asked me to be here."

"You know he isn't going to show up, right?" Thomas said. "And even if your family got their hands on him, they only get a limited number of teleports before he's drained."

"I know, and that could have been avoided if you had been willing to work with them, Thomas."

"I don't work with blackmailers," the rat stated.

"Mama," one of the twins called, running toward them. "Papa's not well."

Victor was looking at them, eyes wide and shaking. The other twin was hugging him, but not getting a reaction.

"If you'll excuse me," Orinda said as she stood and joined her husband, helping him to his feet and escorting him up the stairs.

Jacques cursed quietly. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought that up with him within earshot."

"Is it safe to ask what was about?" Niel asked.

Thomas looked at the badger, who sighed.

"When my family found out Victor was staying in France, they tried to use him to play hard ball with Thomas."

"The teleportation thing?" Niel asked.

"Yes. Being the only one means some people will be unreasonable about gaining control of him. My family was such idiots."

"Not all of them," Thomas said.

"Sure, but I didn't exactly try to stop them. Anyway. They kidnapped him. Fortunately for them, they didn't even think of touching him beyond that, but instead of getting Thomas to heel, he went to the Dumier and offered them his services in exchange for their help rescuing his brother."

"That's..." Niel couldn't find the words.

"Just about the stupidest thing anyone could do after what Vic went through at the hands of the Lewistons," Roland said. He'd gotten a plate of cheeses and cold cuts out of the fridge and was eating. Again.

“I’m not even going to ask about that,” Niel said, remember Jacques’ shake of the head and now had an idea what it had been about. “So you’re here because they think you can convince Thomas to change his mind?”

The badger snorted. “I’m here because I’m one of two Mercier Thomas will allow anywhere near his family, and because I helped rescue Victor, he can stand having me around.”

“They’re hoping that Firmin will pop in for a visit instead of Thomas,” Roland said. “Which shows just how stupid they are. After how they treated him, is it any wonder Fir wants nothing to do with them?”

Niel racked his memory trying to pull up anything relevant.

“I was in Minneapolis to keep an eye on him,” Jacques said in a flat tone. “My instructions were to kill him if he did anything to ‘bring shame’ to our family. Henry played with that enough I don’t think I’d have done it no matter what Fir did, but it gives you an idea what my family thinks of him.”

“Just because he’s a shapeshifter, I mean who can copy powers?”

“Historically, body thieves have abused their powers,” Hubert said. “It doesn’t justify how Firmin was treated, but the last one before him nearly started a war in china, so they don’t get a lot of leeway.”

“That’s bullshit,” Thomas said. “They’re just a convenient scapegoat. It’s not like anyone can prove the guy wasn’t actually him since he blew himself up in the attempt. The Society just wanted to be able to claim they weren’t responsible for it. Or are you going to try to convince me that trying to topple governments isn’t something the society did, even back then?”

The discussion turned too intense for him. The historical aspects was interesting, but Jacques and Hubert were strongly on one side and Thomas equally on the other. This wasn’t about exploring opinion, but hammering yours onto the other. He looked to Roland, who had a new plate in his hand, but the rat shrugged.

Niel stood and only Roland noticed. He left them to their argument and decided to walk around until his ride arrived. There were a few other rooms on the ground floor—He wasn’t going up, not with Victor there and the fragile state he was in. A small guest room, an office and stairs leading down into a cellar. That made sense, with the grapes being grown. The winery proper was probably elsewhere on the property.

Racks of wines lined one wall, with the occasional large barrel between them. Those had a name, butts, maybe? The whole basement seemed to be a wine cellar and after the second turn he considered going back up, but noticed that the front of one of those butts was opened as if it was a door.

Was there really a secret door in the safe house where Roland’s brother was staying? He should probably walk away, he thought as he approached it. Whoever was responsible for it wouldn’t want him looking inside.

Then again, if they were serious about it remaining a secret, they shouldn’t have left it open.

Inside, the room was the size of a decent bedroom and before Niel noticed anything else, the sword floating in the middle of it, had all his attention.

It was a plain iron sword as far as he could tell. Other than pictures in history books, he knew little about them. The handle looked to be leather, the guard straight and plain.

And it was floating there, handle up, point down. It had to be a trick, right?

Of course not. Magic was a thing, so it could be that. Probably was. Was it suspended or encased?

He reached for it, considering pushing it as a test.

“I wouldn’t touch it, if I were you.”

Niel jumps up and away from the sword, tuning to face the kangaroo standing in the doorway with an amused smile on his muzzle.

“Why?” Niel asked, trying to force his heard back in place.

“Staves, which that is, even if it looks like a sword, don’t react well to anyone who’s been claimed by a god.” He stepped in and started to close the front of the barrel. He stopped. “Is one of the twins in here? I swear neither of them are initiated and it’s like they already have the power to find what you don’t want found.”

“I think that’s called being a kid.” Niel looked around, taking in the room fully. Other than the sword, there was nothing there. The walls were packed dirt, as was the ground. There were indications there might have been furniture at some point, but those had been taken away.

The door closed and Niel realized he was in a room with a stranger who called a sword a staff. Maybe he should rethink his situation.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you. I wasn’t looking for you, but it’s good I have found you.” He offered his hand. “Grant, Grant Summer.”

Niel hesitated before taking it. “Niel Leslie. How do you know I’ve been claimed by a god?” did he have a sign anyone who knew how this worked could see?

“Thomas asked me what I knew about your situation—he’s always asking me about magical stuff. It’s like he thinks I’m some encyclopedia or something. But in this case I do know a little, so if you have questions, I might have answers.”

Niel remembered why the name sounded familiar. “What a Practitioner?”

The question seemed to take the kangaroo by surprise. “Okay, not where I thought this was going, and I don’t think you’re ready for the in depth answer, so here goes. For what matters to you, you can think of us as another faction. We have our magic, just like you have yours. Unlike sex, ours is in part channeled through our staff. Our version of your sigils and phrases is talismans that we make.”

Niel nodded. “So is this your staff then?”

Grant stammered. “No, I’d never even try to claim that.” He looked at the sword. “That’s...” he chuckled. “Even if I could take it, I an nowhere near worthy enough.”

“So where is it?”

“Err, it’s... I mean...”

The man’s reaction had Niel feeling like he’d asked him to exposed his most embarrassing secret. Before he could tell him he didn’t have to answer. The door opened and Jacques looked in.

“At least you two are dressed.” He looked at the sword and then away as if he didn’t want to admit it was there. “You’re ride’s here.” The badger smirked. “You ready to go see your daddy?”

Niel glared and reached for the sword. “If I take that thing and stab you through with it, are you going to survive?”

Grant was before him and holding his hand. “I told you not to touch it. *You* might not survive the attempt.”

Chapter Fifteen

(just realized that Boiseuil and Poulenat at less than 3 miles from one another (I utterly missed how 'small' France is compared to Canada. I am arbitrarily moving Victor to Le Breuil, France, so we can keep Niel having to wait for a car to drive him to see his father)

#

Niel looked out at the passing countryside. A lot of vineyards, fields, with trees in the distance, as well as clusters of houses. And that was in the first ten minutes of the drive. His driver, a badger who kept glancing at him in the rearview mirror, had said it would be a thirty-minute drive to Boiseuil. After leaving the greater Twin Cities area, it could be half an hour before encountering anything resembling a town.

He pulled his attention from the view and looked at his phone. Four messages from his dad, eight texts. He should check them. If not, he should at least send him a message letting him know he was okay. He turned the phone off. His dad hadn't told him about Jarod for eighteen fucking years. He could wait until he was back to find out how Niel was doing.

"So," the driver said, his accent thick. "Jacques said need sex to live." The grin made it plain what the man expected they'd be doing soon.

"How about you keep both hands on the wheel and watch where you're going instead of jerking off to something that isn't going to happen?"

The badger muttered in French, but he put his hand back on the wheel and stopped glancing at Neil in the rearview mirror.

* * * * *

"What is this," Niel muttered to himself, watching the picturesque houses with whitewashed walls and exposed beams they slowly drove by, "a movie set?" it was exactly what he'd imagined a town in France would look like, build from the occasional foreign movie he'd watch in history class, or at home. There was a series of old films with Louis de Funès he'd been curious about after one of his

teachers had mentioned the comedian.

Wide roads with almost no vehicles other than bicycles and the occasional farm tractor. The cafes had open terraces with people drinking. The building had a sense of maintained age to them and the people looked happy, at peace.

It was all so surreal.

“We’re here,” the driver said as he stopped the car. “Numeros quarante-trois is the one over there.”

Niel was out of the car and headed for Forty-three Rue du Boucher. It was the two-story house with a whitewash that was more gray, and a few of the exposed beams looked to have been replaced recently.

He knocked on the door and realized he was nervous. What was he supposed to say? Hi, I’m your son, felt like too cold of an opening.

The door opened and instead of Jarod, a girl of maybe ten looked at him and asked a question in French.

Fuck, did they even speak English? “Is Jarod Irvine here?” he stammered out.

She rolled her eyes and went inside, yelling something. The one word he understood was American, although the pronunciation was definitely French. Not long after that, another raccoon came to the door, this one a guy in his mid-twenties at most. He was the twin of the picture his dad had shown him of Jarod.

The man looked Niel up and down and his expression became a mix of tired and annoyed. “What do you want?” There was no accent at all, and while the tone was mostly neutral, the words were definitely clipped.

Niel opened his mouth to lay into the man about never contacting him, but the girl was hanging back, watching attentively.

He swallowed his anger. “I’d like you to call that messaging service you gave my dad, your grandson, as a contact once in a while.”

The man mutters something to himself. Not English or French, or German, but the tone was angry.

“Jarod?” a woman asked, then appeared in the hallway, a girl no more than five next to her. She was holding onto her leg as if she was afraid someone would steal her mother away. The rest of what she said, Niel didn’t understand. Jarod escorted her back but left the door open, so Niel wasn’t surprised when he returned, putting on a jacket.

As soon as he closed the door, Jarod rounded on Niel. “I don’t know what you’ve been told, but if you’re here so I’ll fuck you, leave.”

“Where the fuck do you get off thinking that’s what I want?” Niel snapped. “Don’t you think I’d like to know who my father is?”

“Stewart is your father, not me.”

“Bullshit! It’s your DNA that’s running through my veins. If you didn’t want to have to deal with me, you should have stayed out of my family’s affairs.”

“I got involved because Stewart basically begged me for a child.”

“Well, congratulation, here I fucking am. And because of that, there are things I need to know, things that would have been fucking nice if you’d been around to teach me before this was dumped on

me.”

The raccoon rolled his eyes. “What you’re asking about isn’t sunshine and puppies. It’s not something you want to be involved in, the consequences are—”

“Oh, fuck off with consequences. They’ve already happened. So I’m going to get you to explain this whole fucking thing to me.”

“What are you talking about?” Jarod asked, seemingly surprised.

Now it was Niel’s turn to roll his eyes. “The need ‘sex to survive’ thing. What else did you think I was talking about?”

Jarod shook his head, started to reply, then looked around; Niel followed his gaze. Their shouting had attracted quite the crowd, and Jarod seemed embarrassed at that. He spoke to them in French, indicating Niel, and got chuckles out of them before they dispersed. If not for how red Jarod’s ears were, Niel might think he had been made the butt of a joke.

“We’re lucky neither of us mentioned magic,” Jarod said. “Although I had to explain the needs sex to live part as you never getting enough.” He sighed. “How about we take this somewhere we can have a modicum of privacy?”

Niel nodded and motioned to the badger who’d stayed by the car through all this that he and Jarod were heading off together.

* * * * *

The Cafe was a few minutes’ walk from Jarod’s house, and he ordered something in French as soon as they entered to the buck behind the counter, then took Niel to a booth in the back of the room, away from the sunlight entering via the large bay window. The badger who entered after them sat at a table near the door. Niel was almost as annoyed at him as he was at Jarod.

He didn’t need a babysitter.

Niel opened his mouth, but the server placed sandwiches before him and Jarod, along with a large mug of something that was the color of hot chocolate but smelled of coffee. Niel ground his teeth when Jarod started eating instead of talking.

“Eat,” the raccoon said between bites.

“I’m not hungry,” Niel snapped.

“One, keep your voice down. If you draw attention to us, there’s nothing I can do about it. Two, eat so people won’t start asking questions. You have no idea how weird people get when they start noticing you don’t have to go to the shitter anymore.”

“Maybe you never had to deal with it, being the first and all that? But right now, if I eat anything, it’s going to come out explosively, so if anyone asks, just tell them I’m too pissed to eat. As for being noticed.” (and I swear, when I gave Niel the cone of silence, I didn’t think of this scene at all) Niel cut his finger and used the blood to trace the cone of silence *phrase*. Olavo had warned him against using blood, but Niel wasn’t reaching in his pants in a public place. “Now I can scream at you as much as I want and no one will hear.”

Jarod looked at the sigils and seemed to deflate slightly. “How did it happen?”

“How do you think?”

“I’m trying to understand this, Niel. Believe it or not, I have no idea what happened to you right now.”

Niel let out a breath and eyes the mug. Well, he’d drank broth without a problem and he

needed something. It turned out to be coffee, very hot and with far more milk than he preferred.

“There was a party; I had sex with a guy who happens to be from the Survivors.”

Jarod shook his head, then looked at the *phrase* in blood on the tabletop. “I didn’t know that could happen,” he stated, as if that absolved him of everything. “When did you find out?”

“Last weekend. My football coach—Jarod rolled his eyes—has this stupid tradition he gets the seniors to perform for No Nut November. I still managed to have sex until the away game where he cock-blocked me constantly. That left me tired and the next day I thought I’d caught something during the game. A stomach bug or something like that. I was too tired to have sex, and it got worse enough I had to be hospitalized the next day. The doctors were baffled by my results, and before you freak out, the local Society family took care of that. Dad put two and two together and knew just enough to insist I go home. Instead, he drove me to a friend of his. We had sex, and I felt better. When he showed me your picture, I was pretty sure you weren’t who I had sex with, but the party was pretty wild, so I went to the guys who organized it, they’re Society, and that’s when I found out about my friend and his connection to the Survivors.”

“Does your father know you’re here?”

“Oh, I don’t know, do you?”

“Does Stewart know you’re here?” Jarod corrected pointedly.

“Yes... actually, no. He thinks I’m in Argentina.”

“Why would he think you’re there?”

“There’s where my friend is from, and when he told his father what had happened, but Cuevas asked to see me.”

“Why?”

“I never got an answer on that. The Patriarch freaked out when he found out I’m your son. Did you even stick around to find out if you had a boy or a girl?” Niel demanded before Jarod could ask another question.

He shrugged. “Never had a boy before, didn’t expect this to be a first.”

“So you’d have hung around if you’d found out?”

“No. Stewart asked for a kid, I gave him one; my job was done.”

“So my dad just let you bang my mom?” Niel asked angrily.

Jarod chuckled. “It’s the twenty-first century, Niel, not the nineteenth. There is something called an artificial womb.”

“I thought you had to put it in to have a kid.” Somewhere in one of the memories the bat gave him, someone explained that to him.

“So does just about everyone.” Jarod smirked. “Won’t it be fun when they found out?” His amusement died. “On second thought, don’t tell them. I have no interest in having to disappear again.”

“Oh? Disappearing on me was enough?”

“It wasn’t about you, Niel. I didn’t leave you. I was never there. I wasn’t supposed to be part of your life. Stewart never said it, but I could see it on his face the entire time I was there. This fear that if I stayed it would strain his marriage.”

“Fine. That wasn’t about me. Okay. You weren’t kept apprised of what happened to me, so you didn’t care to get involved. I’m here now. So how about you get involved.”

“No. I don’t know what you want, Niel.”

“I want a father, to start with.”

“You have one,” Jarod said through gritted teeth.

“He lied to me!” Niel was up, hands on the table, in Jarod’s face. “For eighteen fucking years, he kept you a secret. What kind of father does that to his son?”

“One that understands I would do you any good, Niel. Sit down before people wonder why they can’t hear you.”

“You can’t send me away.” Niel crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m pretty sure if I tell that badger over there to take you away, he will.”

“Damn it, there are things only you can tell me about.”

“Asked the Cuevas. They’ll know the stuff you have to know.”

“Don’t act like I don’t mean anything to you!”

“I’m not acting, Niel. I am not who you think I am.”

“You’re my father!”

Jarod ran a hand over his face. “Stewart is your father, not me.”

“Fine! He’d your grandson, which makes me your great-grandson, so don’t fucking act like we’re not family!” He was standing again, and he sat before Jarod told him to.

“Steward didn’t consider me family until he needed me for something.” He dipped his napkin in the mug’s bottom and use the liquid to wipe the blood off the table. “We are not family, Niel. Go make your own.”

Niel glowered at the older, young-looking raccoon, as he signaled for the check.

“Look, Niel. You have all of time to come to terms with me not being interested in being part of your life. Right now. Go home. I’m sure this is as much of a shock to your parents as it is to you. Go to your father and your mother so they know you’re okay.”

“My mom’s dead,” he replied, making the statement an accusation.

“I’m sorry, Niel. I’m sorry, but that is something else you’ll have to learn to get used to.”

Chapter Sixteen

“The bridge is approaching,” the driver said.

Niel looked ahead, momentarily wondering why the badger was bringing that up. Then remembered the exchange on the way to the town. He glared at the man through the rearview mirror. Did he really think now was the time to be flippant and—

The eyes that looked back at him had no mirth in them and Niel realized the man was offering him a way to distract himself. He was almost pissed at how thoughtful the driver was, but that was the need to use anger to avoid feeling the rest of what he felt.

He shook his head and went back to looking out the window.

He wanted to feel something. This was too much like what he remember losing is mom had felt like. That emptiness inside him demanding to be filled. Only it was stupid to feel that over a man he'd never known existed until not even a week ago, and had never met before now. He hadn't actually lost a father when Jarod just sent him away. So why the fuck did it feel like he had no one all of a sudden?

“I do not know what that was about,” the driver said, looking ahead. “But if you ask, I will turn around and kick that guy’s ass for you?”

“Wouldn't you rather fuck it?” Niel snapped.

“Oui. But you are who I am looking after, so I will do what you want.” The driver’s lips quirked in a smile. “I will fuck you if you want.”

Niel opened his mouth, maybe sex would be good. It would give him something other than— he frowned as smoke became visible in the distance. He tried to remember if he'd seen a fireplace at Victor's house, then realized that was a lot of smoke for a chimney.

“Do they have bonfires around here?” Niel asked as the driver picked up speed, cursing in French.

* * * * *

“Remain in the car,” the driver said as he brought up to a skidding stop. Before Niel could

respond, the badger was out and running at the battle.

The house was on fire and partially collapsed. Outside, people were fighting. Easily two dozen and Niel didn't recognize most of them.

One swung a stick like a baseball bat, no, that was a baseball bat, and the detonation as if stopped was so intense that the car he was in shook even if it hadn't been aimed at him. Niel on caught a glimpse of the bear that had been the target before he vanished in the distance. A lot of the people had weird weapons. Weirder than a baseball bat anyway.

A woman held a crook like that shepherds held in really old pictures. She pointed it at a bear who was aiming a gun and he contorted until he was on all four and Niel lost sight of it. He found someone he knew just as Jacques was stuck with the baseball bat wielding marmot. Niel scrambled out of the car, working out one when the badger impacted it and shrapnel erupted, that he'd subconsciously worked out that would happen.

The badger climbed out of the furrow he'd made in the ground, cursing loudly in French. His clothing were burned, rippled, melted and... was that Christmas wrapping paper dangling from below the pant's knee?

"What is going on?" Niel asked and Jacques stared at him, asking a question in French. "English."

"What are you doing here?"

"Trying to figure out what's going on?"

"Jacques!" someone yelled, the Germain accent tell Niel who it was before the collie slid behind the car.

"I'm fine," the badger replied. "It's not like they can hurt me."

"You didn't know your power made you immune to transmutation," Hubert accused him, pointing at the exposed leg.

"It's not like I ever tried that." He dusted himself but kept low. "You need to get Niel behind the barn with other others."

"What the fuck is going on?" Niel demanded.

"Chamber attack," the collie replied.

"What?" Niel asked.

"Not the time or the place to answer questions," Hubert said and looked over car's hood. "I don't see Thomas."

"He was popping in and out, getting people behind the barn last I saw him."

"Who's left?"

"I don't know. They attacked while a lot of the field workers were in the house, eating Nadia's cooking."

"The house is on fire!" Niel exclaimed and got a look from both of them that had his ears folding back. Of course they knew. They'd been here when it happened.

"Grant took care of the woman with the fire staff, but none of the hoses have water and no one among the Dumier had fire as a power or water or anything that could put it out. There's nothing we can do to save it."

"That doesn't make any sense," Jacques said. "I saw a group of them run in before it was fire bombed."

Hubert shrugged and pushed the car on its side with a hand. “Stay with me, Niel.” He grabbed the undercarriage and lifted it an inch off the ground. He looked at Jacques. “A Citroën? Really? Doesn’t anyone in this country have a decent German car?”

“Look, my family is in the arts, okay? Not military armament.”

“A Volkswagen is better built than this tin can.” The collie began walking. “Where are you going?” he demanded when Jacques ran in the opposite direction.

“The house. I can’t believe they killed their own people, so I want to find out what they are up to.”

“Idiot!” he yelled after the badger. “You still need to breathe!” He cursed in German. “Niel, you need to run, if I let him reach the house he will kill himself of smoke inhalation.”

“Aren’t you going to die the same way if you go in there with him?”

The collie grinned. “Who said I was going in there? Run.” He turned and threw the car at the badger. Niel stared in shock, then noticed the three people with something in their hands who had also noticed the collie and ran for the barn.

Light flashed behind him, and heat, then the barn was between him and most of the fighting. He watched Hubert dodge laser beams that came from a large flashlight? Who the fuck were those people? Niel understood Magic changed things, but a flashlight that threw lasers? A baseball bat that packed enough of a punch to send Jacques through a fucking car? This was insane?

He heard a commotion at the back of the barn and ran for it. He rounded the corner on a man holding a scythe, his back to Niel and pointing it at a group of men and woman in work clothing. One was on the ground, withering away as Niel watched.

He ran at the man and tackled him before he could aim it at someone else. The giraffe bucked under him but Niel hung on, then the scythe was raised and Niel cursed. He grabbed it before it could hurt anyone and—

It hurt.

Niel hardly felt the impact as he landed from the pain coursing through him. He couldn’t move, he could barely think. How could anything hurt this much? He wanted to scream, but his throat was constricted. He had trouble breathing he realized. His lungs didn’t respond, he was suffocating, on top of being torn apart.

Then the pain lowered a little, enough his lungs worked again and he rolled on his side, gasping. He still wanted to scream, but the sight of the kangaroo ripping the scythe out of the giraffe’s hand, kicking him away, then bringing it down on his knee and shattering it in hundred of pieces was just too amazing to be interrupted by screams.

The giraffe was up and screaming, but Grant punched him twice and he stayed down. Then he walked to Niel and knelt next to him. “That was really brave,” the kangaroo said, “especially since I warned you staves won’t let someone claimed by a god touch it.”

Was that what it had been? Maybe he wouldn’t tell him he hadn’t realized that, or even remembered the warning. Being brave sounded better than being stupid right now.

The kangaroo pulled Niel to a sitting position and placed something around his chest and the pain vanished. Niel slumped and nearly lost consciousness from the relief.

“Can’t have that,” Grant said, shaking him. “There’s still stuff to do and I could use the help.”

“With what,” Niel mumbled, pushing the decision to close his eyes away. The pain was gone, so

he needed to help. You didn't bail out on the team just because you'd been an idiot and partied all night. He got to his feet and Grant steadied him.

"They're here for the staff. We need to keep them out of the house until it's burned down."

"Jacques saw three of them go in," Niel said, distracted by the phone buzzing in his pants. He took it out. "Hello?"

"Finally," a woman said. "Don't you ever answer your phone? There's like a dozen missed calls in there. Do you have any idea how hard it is to work through the disruption the Chamber's is throwing up? You are lucky I got my worm in your phone before you were in there."

"Who is this?"

She sighed. "Just let me talk with Grant if he's around. I'm not wasting time explaining things to you."

"It's for you," he said, handing the phone.

"Shila?"

Thomas appeared, placing an injured bear down and when he looked in Grant's direction, the kangaroo shook his head and made ashooing motion. The rat looked over his shoulder and vanished.

"I don't know if we can hold out that long. The Chamber didn't hold anything back this time. I had seven Dumier watching over the property and they are all down at this point." He looked at Niel. "I think they might already have reached Joan's staff."

Roland made it around the corner with an older man over his shoulder

"I know," Grant snapped. "The first thing I did two years ago was add my own talismans as security. But like I just told you, they brought out everyone. I think every Chamber agent in the surrounding countries might be here."

Niel left Grant to whoever that was and ran to help Roland with the injured man. Maybe he'd get answers now.

"What happened?"

"These assholes showed up while we were having a nearly lunch and totally ruined it. The Dumier guards fought back while Grant got Vic and the rest of my family to safety."

"And why aren't you with them?"

The rat looked at Niel, dumbfounded. "Because I can help?"

"How? You're just like me. Like them." He indicated the workers.

"I'm Society, I have a duty to help."

"You don't even have powers."

"I do."

Niel stared.

"Okay, I don't know what it is, but I had my ceremony, so I do have powers. I know it isn't precognition, or telekinesis, or teleportation, or controlling fire or—"

"I get it. You have no idea what your power is. More reasons to stay out of the fighting."

"These assholes attacked my brother's home. Do you have any idea how terrified Victor is of anything relating to magic? This is going to set back the work the shrink's been doing with him decades." He paused. "And even worse they attacked before I had dessert. Mom made her pineapple upside down cake."

Niel nearly called Roland out on that stupidity, but he'd had Niadia's upside down Pineapple cake, and it was really good. The rat grinned at Niel's hesitation.

"You're going to get yourself killed."

Roland shook his head. "I'm just getting the people who couldn't make it here that Thomas hasn't had the time to get to yet. He's focusing on anyone in bad condition."

"The Merciers are twenty minutes out," Grant said, handing Niel his phone back. "That's how long we need to stall the Chamber." He didn't sound confident.

"Thomas isn't going to be happy," Roland said.

"Fortunately, the Mercier isn't one of the things your brother is irrational about. He'll understand they were the closest ones to us. It doesn't change the fact they are too far to do us any good."

"So we keep rescuing people," Roland said. "Most of them are already here. Bruno," he pointed to the bear seated against the barn, missing his left arm. "Can still blast anyone coming here. 'Right Bruno?'"

The bear gave a thumbs up, then the arm dropped like it was too heavy. Two other bears were unconscious next to him. Or at least Niel hoped they were unconscious.

"Roland," Grant said. "This isn't some—"

"This is Vic's home. I'm not sitting back like some scared kid. Even if I was scared, they totaled where my brother lives. They aren't getting away with that."

"Your brother is fine, Roland. The panic room can survive anything short of a nuclear explosion with the amount of magic that went into building it. Getting yourself killed isn't going to help his state of mind."

"I have magic and power," The rat replied.

The kangaroo rubbed his face. "I wish you were like like Thomas when he got his power. At least he was wisely reluctant to throw himself in danger."

"Are we talking about the same Thomas who ran toward the fight you almost lost against six Chamber agents?"

"It was only three," Grant replied. "And he didn't know how dangerous it was."

"Right because lasers and earth moving is so normal."

Grant closed his eyes and let out a groan which caused Roland to smile in victory.

"Fine," the kangaroo said. "But be careful, Thomas isn't going to forgive me if you get yourself killed."

"I won't. Come on Niel." Roland said and ran to the edge of the barn.

"He won't..." Niel said. "Get himself killed, or be careful?"

"He's your best friend," Grant replied in exasperation. "You'd know more than I would."

"I think he's a little high on the idea of having some sort of power."

"Then we better make sure he stays alive to figure out what it is."

Niel reached where Roland had been and the Rat was already ducking behind an overturned minivan. Explosions and lasers and fire balls flew around and as far as Niel could tell, these Chamber people were just blasting randomly at this point. In there was anyone left to oppose them, they were staying down.

When Roland motioned to him, Niel hesitated, then ran to join him.

“I’m going to make a run for that car, the driver was on the other side the last time, unconscious. He’s a Dumier, but I don’t know what his power is. I’ll signal you when to come.” The rat was running before Niel could protest.

He studies the field. The car in question was halfway between the house and the barn. It could have been driven there on purpose to give people heading for the barn some cover, but now it was on its side, which offered more cover, if the Chamber people weren’t already between it and the barn.

It was a good thing coming up with plays during the game wasn’t his job. He couldn’t even think of what would be the best thing to do here if there had a bunch of people with powers at their disposal.

Roland poked his head around the car and Niel over, but before the raccoon could move, something exploded out of the house. Roland screamed, then something large and metal impacted the car where the rat had been standing. The car didn’t even shake from the impact as metal wrapped itself around it.

As if that had been a signal, the Chamber people stopped throwing powers around and the battlefield fell silent. The fire in the hole the blast created parted and three people stepped out.

At the lead was a vole holding a metal staff with red spots on it. Niel could make them out clearly. Next to him a woman with a glass rod and on his other side a smirking rottweiler with a sword resting on his shoulder.

“Kingsley!” Grant yelled striding toward the group. “That doesn’t belong to you!”

“Why Grant, don’t you think it’s high time you and your little group of wanna be stop hoarding treasures like this?”

“It’s too dangerous!”

The vole rolled his eyes. “Only for people like you who prefer destroying what they claim to stand for, rather than giving themselves over to it.” He looked at his companions. “You’re going to want to hold on dears.”

“No!” Grant ran for them, but the baseball wielding bull stepped around an upturned truck and swung. Grant turned and took the hit on his shoulder. The detonation happened, but the kangaroo only slid back a foot.

In that time, the vole raised his staff and cars began sliding toward them, only to be pushed away as they took off in the air.

Chapter Seventeen

“Someone help me!” Niel yelled as he ran to where the car had slid to. Roland hadn’t been where it had been, so he had to have been dragged with it when the vole had done whatever it was he had with his staff. “Roland’s trapped under it!”

Under. He had to be under. He did what he could not to think about how he’d been standing between before the car when that metal barrel had collided with it. He had to have thrown himself down at the last moment, even if Niel hadn’t seen it happen.

Grant was next to him as Niel tried to pull the car up. Who they needed was Hubert, so what was the collie waiting for? Thomas joined them, along with others. He was whispering under his breath frantically.

Niel caught Roland’s name multiple times there, and the tone was pleading. He understood how he felt. Niel wanted to plead with someone, anyone, for his best friend to be okay, so Thomas had to be frantic.

Niel heard a high pitch sound just before Jacques joined them and use some of Thomas’s blood to write on the wreck of the car. The sound came again and Niel looked down. Motion next to the car, like a stick figure waving their arms. Niel shook his head to clear his vision, but the form was still there.

“Roland?” he asked, dropping to a knee.

“Finally,” the tiny rat yelled, his voice faint and high pitch.

“Roland!” Thomas exclaimed, scooping up his tiny, naked brother. “You’re alive!”

“Looks like we know what my power is,” Roland replied.

“I am so glad you’re alive. Mom and dad would have killed me if you’d died.”

“They wouldn’t have done that,” Roland said.

Thomas looked around. “Okay, the ground by the barn’s clear. You can get back to your normal size there.”

“About that,” the tiny rat said. “I’ve been trying to do that since getting out from under the

wreck.” He hesitated. “I think I might be stuck at this size.”

* * * * *

The humor of Roland’s predicament didn’t last. There were a lot of injuries and a few deaths, the worst of which, for Thomas and Jacques, was Hubert. His body was found under another car, a broken transmission shaft through his chest. Not long after that, Victor came running, Orinda at his side and the twins in tow. He hugged Thomas and apologized over and over for having hidden, instead of trying to help. There was an instant of panic as the older rat looked around, asking after Roland, who grabbed onto the edge of Thomas’s shirt’s breast pocket and pulled himself over it.

Instead of running off at the display of power, Victor hugged Thomas again and cried. Then Victor and family were escorted aside and everyone else returned to looking for more dead.

* * * * *

“Niel?” Thomas asked. The Raccoon was sitting against the barn, facing the setting sun, exhausted. “How about I take you home?”

“Shouldn’t you see to the others first?” the Mercier who had arrived too late had taken as many as they could to the hospital, and more have followed, but those with minor injuries were still there.

“After this, I’m good for one teleport. Then I’m going to be out of it for a few hours, no matter how much sex I get. So I’m getting you home so you don’t miss classes.”

Niel snorted. “Classes don’t seem all that important right now. Not after the way we lost.”

“As stupid as it might sound, this isn’t your fight, or even mine. Vic was staying here because the magic protecting that staff was supposed to also keep him and his family safe. Grant never expected it to be attacked by the Chamber.”

“Who are those people? I never got an answer.”

Thomas rubbed his face. “Grant is the one who really knows. As far as I’ve worked out, they’re from two sides of the same faction who are at war over the staffs, but it’s actually a lot more complicated than that. Grant and that vole have a history, and that’s about all I really know.”

Niel nodded. “Roland?”

“Still about an inch in height. He’s with Vic and his family; the twins are having a grand time chasing him with some of their figurines. Jacques doesn’t think it’s permanent, but we need people who’ve studied powers to be sure.” He sighed. “Now I kind of wish he had gotten super speed. I already lost him three times. One of the Mercier nearly stepped on him. Everyone is going to the Dumier estate as soon as they arrive. That’s the only safe landing spot I have left in the country. The vole’s departure did a number on the front and inside of the barn and I don’t know if that’s enough to screw up my ‘intimate knowledge’ of my landing spot, and I’m not testing it now.”

Niel nodded, a reflex rather than understanding. He didn’t know how Thomas’s power worked, so he took him at his word. He stood. “Is anyone else coming?”

“No, you get the travel the Thomas Express all by yourself this time.” The rat placed a hand on Niel’s shoulder and before the raccoon could respond to that stupid name, they were in Minneapolis, and the Kuno was making sure Niel was busy.

* * * * *

It shouldn’t be this easy, Niel thought, for everything to go back to normal after that day. A part of him insisted his life should have stopped. The destruction and the deaths should just have brought everything to an end.

Instead, after the middle of the night sex with the guys of Sigma Theta Gamma, he slept for a few hours and had gone to class. As far as his dad was concerned, Niel had flown back from Argentina on Sunday and spent the time with the guys. They'd argued about why Niel hadn't called to let him know he was back. He'd almost told him about the attack in France, but to explain what he was doing there would mean talking about Jarod, and he was not ready to do that with his dad.

Normal now meant meeting up with Limbani after his morning drill. The monkey had jumped at the chance to be Niel's ensured daily sex. He had even tried to talk the frat into having Niel move there so they could all get in on ensuring he always had enough sex, but Kuno had vetoed the idea. They all liked Niel, but they weren't letting someone who wasn't from a family in again.

Not after Thomas.

In between his classes, Niel made his own hook-ups happen. It wasn't because he needed it once a day, he was limiting himself to that. Olavo had told him he couldn't stock them up. And Niel had just looked at him and challenged the Capybara to have sex only once a day since that was all he too needed to survive.

And within a few days, it was normal, and it was too easy to think of France as some strange nightmare that hadn't really happened. Until he got a message from Roland via Thomas, since he was still one inch tall, telling him about the things he was getting up with.

Way too many of those messages came with pictures. Niel was accepting of sex in all its strange forms, but... well, he realized that the idea someone the size of Roland would find ways of still doing it... was taking some getting used to.

Still, things were now normal enough he was here in the library working on his ancient Rome paper, trying to find something on it the teacher hadn't already read papers on a hundred times. Most of the Caesars were out, even the least known would be the subject of a paper because someone had wanted to do a paper on Julius, but decided he was too famous and went looking for the most obscure one.

Maybe he could talk about the roads? He could use the 'all roads lead to Rome' phrase in it and get points for dropping modern expressions in the paper. He'd noticed the teacher liked using them.

Was it a modern expression? A quick search online told him it went as far back as the twelfth century. Not modern at all, but it gave him an idea of how to approach his paper. He could go at the roman empire sideways; see what other proverbs and saying it had spawned that still resonated today.

He was in the Ancient Rome section, looking for a specific philosopher's book since the internet had mentioned a few modern sayings linked to it, when someone else stepped into it. Niel paused, recognizing the Pallas Cat, and wondered what he was doing here. He'd know if he was a history student, even from one of the other years, and there weren't any other reasons to come to this section, except...

"Hello," Fedor said, "Saw you come this way. Wanted to say hello."

Niel smiled at the accent. He'd forgotten how thick it was. "You waited until I was all the way back here to want to say hello?"

The pallas cat smiled. "May have heard stories of Ancient Roman exploits."

Niel walked toward Fedor and the cat met him halfway. "And you somehow knew this is where I was coming?"

The cat ran a finger down the raccoon's shirt. "May have heard of Niel's own exploits among

Ancient Romans.”

Niel cupped Fedor’s crotch. The cat was already hard. “You’re looking for a repeat of the party?”

Fedor frowned. “Party was good.”

Niel chuckled and unzipped the cat. “You were really good.” He pulled the cock out and stroked it. Hard, thick, and longer than average. He remembered how good it had felt. Now he was curious how it tasted. He drooped to his knees and swallowed the cock to the root before the cat said anything. Then he was too busy moaning to try.

The pants dropped as Niel deep throated the cock and he took hold of the balls, impressed with how thick the fur was there too. A squeeze had the cat thrust in his muzzle with a grunt. Then a hand on his head held him in place as Fedor took over. The cock moved in his muzzle, going deep, then shallow and deep again. The grunting intensified, the thrusting became more urgent, then cum was filling his muzzle. A lot of it and Niel had to quickly swallow. When Fedor let go of his head, Niel stood.

“I do same?” the cat asked, still panting.

Niel smiled. “If it’s the same to you, I would like a go at that ass of yours.”

“Not the same,” Fedor replied, frowning. “You suck me. The same is I suck you.”

Niel stifled the laughter. “It’s an expression, Fedor. It means ‘if you don’t mind’.”

“English is strange. Russian is more straight.”

Niel covered his muzzle, this time needing the help to keep the volume down. “I think you mean straightforward.”

The pallas cat looked about to say something, then shook his head. “Fucking me is fine.”

Niel grinned and turned the pallas cat around and sank in his finger into the thick ass fur. “I love this,” he whispered.

“You can give massage,” Fedor said. “After fuck.”

Niel grinned and took the packet of lube out of his pants before dropping them. “Try not to be too loud,” he whispered, then slowly pushed his lubed cock in the pallas cat’s ass.

#

Chapter Eighteen

“Look,” Niel told Olavo. “I’m not asking for you to get me the entire encyclopedia on them, I’d just like one book, you know, the overall history.”

The capybara pulled the raccoon into his bedroom. “And I would like to help you.” He closed the door and took his clothes off. “But what you want doesn’t exist. The Cuevas refused to put anything in writing.”

“So is that going to be for every family?” Niel asked undressing. “Or is it because of the tension I could feel in the room? Before they found out who my father was.”

“It predates this Patriarch.” Olavo pushed Niel onto the bed. “And I don’t know about the other families.”

“Can you put me in touch with someone who—”

“Yes, yes, but after.”

Niel grinned and spread his legs.

* * * * *

The guy Olavo put Niel in contact with turned out to be Dario. The same Dario who had sought Niel out while he was staying with the Medeiros. The capybara had heard many stories about how the Survivors had started, and they didn’t all agree with each other, even the people within his family didn’t all believe the same ones to be true.

The one thing Niel did get confirmation on was that the expedition to Antarctica took place around World War Two. It could be a little before or after, that Dario wasn’t sure of, but Nazis were involved, all the stories he’d heard agreed on that. Dario agreed to contact someone he knew with the Suzuki family and try to get them to talk with him, but made no promises.

With a starting point, Niel threw himself into research in his free time. World War two was now so far back that just about everything had been declassified, which meant he had a lot to go through.

He found four antarctic expeditions linked to World War Two, one in Thirty-eight, one in Thirty-

nine, in Nineteen-forty, and forty-three. There were two more by Argentina, but they only coincided date-wise and weren't as a result of the war. Niel felt that if either of them was where the Survivors came from, Dario would have mentioned it. Also, the insistence on the Nazi left him feeling it was an Allies versus Axis push behind the expedition.

That meant the Third German Expedition, the United States Service Expedition, or the German Pacific Commerce one were the most likely. He quickly encountered a problem, each of them had survivors.

He knew five men had survived, but only because he knew about the Survivors. As far as the public would know, this was a lost expedition. Those proved difficult to find. By the time the second war came about, how dangerous the Antarctic was had been documented, so it didn't take much for any expedition to turn around as soon as things went wrong.

At least documented expedition. But if they hadn't been documented, it was out of luck.

Then he had a thought. How much earlier would an expedition have to take place to be considered part of the world war by historians? The Survivors considered it so, but could that be because they saw what happened after? Or before? There was nothing after the war but close enough Niel counted it, but before? Between thirty-three and thirty-eight, eight expeditions had been launched for the Antarctic. Three of which were never heard of again. None of them were by the US but one was by the Germans, in thirty-seven, followed within a month, by a British one.

No one ever said the US was involved in it. Niel made an assumption because he was American, but he didn't even know if Jarod had been at the time of the expedition. How hard would it have been for someone to pass themselves off as American before the advent of widespread computers?

There wasn't much information on the expeditions themselves. Both were noted as exploratory, with the captain's name and for the German one a list of the researcher. The British one only listed the captain, but Niel was able to use that to find a listing of all the ships he'd captain and for whom. The thirty-seven expedition was funded by the British Museum and the Cambridge University. From there, he found out the expedition was in response to a report from a passing plane claiming to have seen a structure in the ice where none were documented. There was a note mentioning a German name Niel had seen in the list from the German expedition. It was handwritten and the scan hadn't been great, but it read like who had written it didn't want to let the other have the prestige of finding proof of a civilization on the Antarctic.

It also mentioned the names of the people he wanted as part of the expedition, Jarod Spencer caught Niel's attention, and looking him up, he found a picture of a raccoon in his fifties, or maybe sixties in Cambridge's public file, an archeology teacher and researcher. Maybe he was younger. The picture was old and the file hadn't been in good condition before being digitized.

He found an obituary for Jarod Spenser in forty-eight that indicated he'd been missing as part of an expedition to the Antarctic for years and was now officially being declared dead.

Other than the man being too old, what Niel had found lined up. So if this was the same Jarod how did he explain the one he'd met looked like his older brother while this one could be his grandfather?

Magic, of course. He didn't know what had happened. Maybe they'd all been turned into young men as part of meeting a god. Maybe it was part of the deal they'd struck. Only one person

really knew, and Jarod had made it clear he wanted nothing to do with him. Niel didn't think he'd appreciate being questioned about his past. If he had been interested in reconnecting with whoever Jarod Spencer had been, he would have gone back to that life and not become whoever he'd been until he took the Irvine name.

#

(so I pieced all of this together feel free to change things as needed. I gave Jarod a different name than Irvine because it wasn't clear if that had been his name back then, or he changed it when he returned from Antarctica. Also, his original nationality of birth was never established as far as I remember and could find, so I made him British. Again, feel free to change things as needed)

#

Bleary-eyed he looked up from the desk's display when the door closed.

"Man, what have you been into these last weeks?" Brendan asked. "Have you even gotten laid?"

"Every day," Niel replied. "What's with the bag?" the cougar was packing.

"I'm getting my stuff ready, my dad's picking me up right after practice tomorrow to take me home."

"But tomorrow's Wednesday."

"Yeah, the Wednesday before thanksgiving. We don't all live a stone's throw from here. I'm looking at a four-hour drive with my dad tomorrow, after having had the coach scream at me for two hours."

It couldn't be.

Thanksgiving wasn't for another two weeks. He brought up the date and was horrified at what he saw. "Oh shit."

"You've got time, relax."

"It's just me and my dad again this year." This couldn't be happening. The two of them at the dinner table with all this tension. The previous two years had been okay, they'd miss celebrating with the Hertz, but he and his dad hadn't been someone who'd withheld the biggest secret possible then.

Maybe he should just not go home. Send his dad a message and claim he was busy with... something. Fuck what would his father think? Niel preferring staying at the dorm rather than having thanksgiving with him. He wasn't *that* angry at him, but with just the two of them, there would be questions, evasion, then he'd get angry and the day would be ruined.

Wait. Why did it have to be just the two of them?

He was out of his chair, jacket in hand, and out of the room before Brendan could ask what had happened.

* * * * *

"Niel!" Limbani exclaimed on opening the door. "Hungry again?"

"Actually, no. I need your help."

"What's up?" Kuno called from the kitchen doorway, a pint of ice cream in hand.

The monkey put his hand in Niel's pants. "Give me a second."

Niel moaned as Limbani stoked him. "Lim, please, Not now."

"Limbani, stop," Kuno ordered. He was next to them, studying the raccoon. "What's wrong?"

Reluctantly, the monkey removed his hand.

Niel caught his breath. "This should be with the rest of the guys, or at least those who aren't going home for Thanksgiving." A minute later he had eight other guys in the living room with him.

"Alright. Things are a bit tense between me and my did."

"Have you two considered fucking it out?" Erwin asked and Niel glared at the rabbit. "What? It's a great way to work out the anger and then you can talk the problem through."

"Niel isn't Society," Peng said. "Respect that he won't be comfortable with some of the things we do."

"Whatever it is, I'll help," Limbani offered eagerly.

"I..." Niel looked for the right words. "No, Lim, thanks, but no."

"I can be subdued."

The explosion of laughter made the monkey cross his arms over his chest. "Now I know who's going without sex for a while."

"I do appreciate it, and if you want to, you can help me with another problem I'm going to have with the away game this weekend."

"Oh, do I get to do the whole team?"

Niel sighed. Maybe someone else would be best. "We'll revisit this. Basically, I need a wingman to come with me to my dad's for Thanksgiving."

"Are things that bad?" Kuno asked.

"Is it because you went with Olavo?" Gagan asked.

"Not really, but also kinda. I just don't want to have Thanksgiving alone with him this year, and I thought that since some of you aren't going home, maybe one of you would be interested in having dinner with us."

"Unless it'll be vegetarian, I have to decline," Gagan said.

"Wait," Kuno said. "If what you're looking to do is throw interference between you and your dad, one person isn't going to be enough."

"We're not set up to feed a large group, Kuno."

"I wasn't thinking of us going to your dad's place," the margay replied, smiling. "I was thinking of you and him coming to my family's place."

Chapter Nineteen

Niel exited the car as quickly as he could to escape the tense silence that had filled it. His dad had tried, and failed, to fill it. Most questions faltered before they were fully uttered. The one he'd managed to say in its entirety had been innocent enough, inquiring about Niel's history classes, but that had made Niel think of the research into that Antarctica expedition and Jarod's history. The reminder of the secret his dad withheld had only rekindled the anger, and Niel had stayed silent rather than let it explode.

The house was rather unassuming, except for its size. It was an apartment building on the outskirts of downtown St-Paul. By the size, it could house five or six families. He suspected Kuno's family lived in the entire building because they were rich, and the margay had mentioned there were a lot of guys living in his father's house.

Niel had refused to come.

His initial argument was that he was nowhere near upper-class enough to be with his family, to which Kuno had rolled his eyes and quickly explained that no one in his family considered themselves 'upper-class'. They were rich, but they all worked and had plenty of friends across a large gap of social levels. Niel was certainly not the poorest person Kuno considered friends.

So, Niel had brought up the fact that he wouldn't have anything appropriate to wear. He'd worn a suit a handful of times in his life, and each one had been a rental. And that if Kuno said their thanksgiving dinner didn't require anyone to wear anything, he wasn't interested in participating.

Kuno had replied by pointing out they were Society, so wearing something was never required, but if they had guests, they ensured they were comfortable, so everyone would be dressed for the meal. Niel could count on that.

In a last attempt, Niel pointed out Kuno couldn't expect his father to just agree to have Niel and his dad over. They'd be two strangers intruding into their thanksgiving.

Kuno rolled his eyes. The two of them were friends, that would be enough to get his dad to agree, but he was also a friend of the Hertz, who was going through a tough time. His father was going

to be overjoyed to set a place for them at their table.

And really, Kuno had added, when the alternative was thanksgiving alone with his dad, and maybe one or two of the guys in the room, which included Limbani, did he really want to turn him down?

So here he was, in his best jeans and shirt and his church shoes. His Sunday Best, as his mother had liked to call it.

He'd expected his dad to shoot down the offer once Kuno confirmed there was no problem with the two of them attending. Instead, Stewart had been elated at the idea. Or he'd just been so happy with Niel talking with him that he would have agreed to anything.

His father was in dress pants and a shirt that he'd wear for a meeting with his boss.

The door opened before they reached it, and a margay a few years older stood in the doorway, watching them. The most surprising thing, in Niel's mind, was that he was actually dressed. Jeans and an old T-shirt with a faded design on it of stylized lightning over an electric guitar and drum set. He looked back inside the house.

"Kuno, your friend and his dad's here! You didn't tell me how hot they were!"

"Bastien!" came a yelled reply, "what have I told you about ogling guests!"

"Be discreet about it!" Bastien replied.

"And do you call what you're doing discreet?"

"I'm not ogling anyone, Dad!" He looked at Niel and his father and rolled his eyes. "The man raises me for the last seven years and he thinks I'm going to obey him more than before he took me in." He offered his hand. "I'm Sebastien. Everyone calls me Bastien. If you don't, we're going to have problems."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Bastien," Stewart replied, shaking the hand.

"Sorry if I made you uncomfortable, but hot guys are hot guys."

Niel's dad chuckled. "I'm flattered, actually."

"Cool, there's nothing hotter than a guy comfortable enough with himself not too offended when another guy calls him hot."

"I think I'm uncomfortable enough for him," Niel said, shaking the hand.

"There's nothing wrong with him considering me hot, Niel."

"It's what I'm pretty sure he's imagining that's got me squirming."

"Don't let my cousin chase you away," Kuno called, sounding out of breath.

"We're not going anywhere," Niel called back.

The margay appeared. "Good, I would have been here to welcome you, but someone—" Kuno glared at Bastien "—told my dad I'd volunteered to help with meal prep."

"Did you want him to as Gaston?"

Kuno closed his mouth, then looked annoyed. "There's thirty other guys in the house right now. Half of whom also know how to cook. You just wanted to be sure I wouldn't be here to supervise you. I apologize if Bastien tried to jump your bones, whoever was in charge of installing his self-control chip should have been fired."

"There was no jumping," Stewart said.

"Well..." Bastien said, looking the older raccoon up and down. Kuno pulled him inside before

he could voice the rest. "I swear, Bass, you give the rest of us a bad name!"

"It's Bastien," the other margay replied.

"Come on in." Kuno moved out of the way. "I can't promise everyone will be on their best behavior, but they will behave." He took their jackets and after putting that in a closet, he escorted them deeper in the house, where they were greeted by a lot of guys, in a wide range of age, from a little younger than Niel, to their mid-thirties with a few in their forties or fifties.

Quickly, Niel found himself separated from his dad as everyone introduced themselves with a shake of the hand and... nothing more. Which threw Niel off a bit since he knew how handsy Society men tended to be.

The few times he could track down his father, he was in a conversation with some of the older men, although even the younger ones seemed happy to talk with him. The few who noticed him while they talked with his dad smiled knowingly.

Niel would have to ask Kuno about that; if he could find him.

* * * * *

Niel still hadn't located his friend by the time Dinner was called, but he'd met just about everyone in the house, he thought, had hadn't been offered a quickie even once. Niel just couldn't figure out if he was reassured they were keeping things respectable, annoyed they didn't seem interested in him, despite the looks he got, or just plain worried this was eventually going to explode.

The dining room was huge. Niel supposed it had to be, with more than two-thirds of the bedrooms in the house occupied. Niel was guided to the table and found himself sitting six seats away from the head, with Kuno next to him. His dad was on the opposite side, a few seats further, in conversation with one of the older men.

The table was loaded with more food than Niel had ever seen. More than needed for even this crowd, he decided. There were seven turkeys, large ones, plenty of cheese and vegetable casseroles, potatoes in multiple forms, loaves of bread, fresh by the smell, bottles of pop, wine, beer.

The plates were plain, a large, a small, a fork, a knife, and a spoon. He realized he'd expected a place setting with twenty different parts, with an instruction manual on how they were to be used.

"Alright everyone," the margay at the head of the table said, as he arrived and stood before his seat. "I want to start by thanking our guests for accepting our invitation and to ask if there is a way you prefer starting a meal. We aren't traditional in our belief, but as our guests, if you want to say grace, please feel free to do so."

"Thank you," Stewart replied, "but this is your home. I'll be happy to follow whatever tradition you do." He was then perplexed at the snickering that caused.

Kuno's dad, Leo, shushed everyone. "That's kind of you. In that case, I'll simply say. Thank you for everything we have, have gotten, and will get. Dig in."

Chaos erupted around the long table as everyone seemed to reach for the food at the same time. Then, things quieted as everyone ate. Niel ate little, but what he did tasted amazing.

"Hey, Niel!" Bastien called from the other side of the table.

"Yes?"

"I thought you lived off sex."

"Sebastien," Leo chastised.

"What? I'm just curious. He's from the Survivors, right? And the story is they don't have to eat,

just have sex. Yet there he is, eating the food we made.”

“I don’t remember you helping,” someone said.

“We, us, the Richards,” Bastian replied with an eye roll. “Not me specifically.”

“Sure,” the same person said, imbuing the one word with an impressive amount of sarcasm.

Niel caught his dad’s interested expression and had to remind himself that Stewart only had the barest of information on what it meant for him to be a Survivor.

“I don’t need to eat,” He said. “So long as I have sex once a day, I’m good, but I can still eat, food tastes good. That reason enough, I think.”

“You aren’t exactly eating like someone who’s loving the food.” The older man next to his father said with a hint of reproach.

“I am.” How much did he want to say? As far as he knew, none of this was a secret to the Society. The Survivors just liked to keep to themselves, and Jarod even more so. “But my body’s not fully adjusted yet. If I eat too much. I basically get sick.” They didn’t need those details. “In a couple of weeks, I should be able to eat and not have any side effect from it.”

“But you don’t get anything from the food? Like at all?” a thirty-something asked. “I thought the surviving off sex was like us, just what we need to do to stay powered up.”

“Powered up?” Stewart asked. And the table fell silent.

“Way to go, Russel,” someone sounding young said.

“He’s his dad,” Russel replied. “How is any of this a secret?”

Kuno groaned. “That’s what I get for not making this a presentation and forcing everyone to watch it.”

“It might have been too much to expect this to remain secret at the table, Kuno,” Leo said, then turned to Stewart. “The short of it is that the group your sun is linked to is part of our group as well. Sex is also power for us. It’s more complex than just that, of course, but magic is real.”

Stewart nodded.

“I was expecting a freak-out,” someone said.

“Pay up!” another one.

Niel noticed Kuno sink in his chair, but he was more interested in his dad’s behavior.

“My grandfather looks younger than me,” Stewart explained. “He explained even details of how things worked for him so I wouldn’t accidentally make them happen to Niel. It’s how I knew what was happening when the doctor mentioned he wasn’t getting any nutrition for food or the IV. It’s a little surprising to find out there’s more, but not really shocking.”

“I’m glad that you’re taking it in well,” Leo said. “It isn’t a common reaction.”

“Can I ask a question in return?”

“Of course.”

“Everyone here’s referring to each other as siblings, but also cousins, Jackson’s your nephew, but you called him son. Also, I didn’t see anyone under seventeen, or women.”

“Ah,” Leo said in the silence. This time, the silence was total. “You were aware of the increase in anti-gay sentiment, seven years ago or so.” Stewart nodded.

It had been all over the news, especially after some protest had turned violent. Even Niel, who was only eleven at the time, remembered it.

“It’s more complicated than just that, of course. We, the Society, were the main target, and we have worked hard at keeping this part quiet, but many of us lost family members during that time. Some families were hit much harder than us, but the Richards’ losses were significant.”

“My condolences,” Niel said at the same time as his dad.

“Thank you. We dealt with the losses by coming together. Not so much abandoning the standard North American family structure, but setting it aside until we are healed.” He paused. “As for the women... I lost my wife during that time. Collateral damage, since I and Kuno were the intended target. We’d been together for twenty years and while there was a push to repopulate, we aren’t the Lewistons, and personal choices were respected. You can think of this household as filled with bachelors. The older of us, because the loss was too much for us to be willing to look for another woman, the youngers... well, they’re young and probably think they have all of the time before them to have a son of their own.”

“Or some of us are, you know, perfectly happy not having a kid?” someone said, sounding quite young.

“Give it time,” the man next to Stewart said. “You don’t know what you’re missing until you’ve held him in your hands.”

“Then I’m golden. I’ll never know what I’m missing.”

“And that’s why there aren’t any kids here tonight?” Stewart asked.

“Oh, there are plenty of kids at this table,” the older man next to him said and looked around the table.

“There are children in this household,” Leo said. “Many babies lost their parents, and the rest of us are doing our part. Because there are so many older boys and men currently, instead of forcing them to endure what I’m sure they’d feel is a tedious meal with us, they have their own Thanksgiving celebration together. One more in line with their age and preferences.”

“And I wish I’d gone to that one now,” someone said.

“As I said,” the man next to Stewart said. “There are children at this table.” This time, the comment generated laughter, and conversations moved on to lighter topics.

Desert was a collection of cakes and pies and Niel was unable to believe anyone at the table was still hungry. He and his dad shared a look of disbelief as arguments over how to get the last piece of a cake erupted.

Once that was eaten—Niel indulged in a little white chiffon cake with the best strawberry ice cream he’d ever tasted—everyone finally seemed to be sated.

At least in one fashion.

The men at the table took off their shirts.

Oh shit.

“Now,” Leo said, standing and undoing his belt. “It’s our tradition to thank Him, the way He wants us to on this day more than others.” There was a lot of disbelieving snorting around the table, even from the older man next to Stewart. “You are welcome to join us in the celebration.”

“I think we should go,” Niel said, standing.

“Why?” Stewart asked his son, perplexed.

Niel stared at his Dad. “Because they’re going to have sex? Guys, together, having sex? I know at least one of them is going to try to force himself on you.”

Steward seemed surprised by the statement. “Niel, why would you think he’d have to force anything?”

“Because you’re straight?” Niel replied, stating the obvious.

His dad smirked. “Niel, how do you think I was comfortable enough asking a gay man to have sex with my son to save his life.”

Niel just stared at this man, trying to process the implications. The realization his dad was bi hit just about the time Bastien exclaimed.

“I call Dibs!”

#

Chapter Twenty

“Glad to see you were able to join us today, Mister Leslie,” Coach Horgar said as Niel ran to join the other players by the bus.

“Sorry about that, Coach. My ride had trouble getting going.”

“Then maybe you need to consider staying in your dorm room when you have an important game.”

“Yes, sir.” Niel tried to stop smiling but was proving difficult. His ride had had no trouble getting going. It was getting the monkey to stop that had been near impossible. Limbani had felt he was owed after having been teased about having dinner with Niel and his dad, only for them to go to Kuno, and the monkey had heard stories of what had happened there. That a certain hot raccoon was actually on the table.

Niel had been about to point out Limbani knew he was always available when it registered he meant his dad.

His dad being bi was... a thing. He'd never expected it, but now that he knew, it raised some questions about Jarod's comment that Stewart hadn't wanted him around because he was worried it would strain his marriage. He hadn't asked his dad. After Thanksgiving, they'd reach some sort of comfort level. Niel didn't know if it would last. He was still angry at the secret, but for now, they could talk without him making everything an accusation, and his dad without constantly sounding like he wanted reassurance the two of them were okay.

As the coach had the players board the bus, Niel figured that so long as Erwin was in Fargo when the bus arrived, he'd be okay to survive the next two days. Two games and then he could focus on his studies.

And he had to.

The coach had been less demanding of Niel since his return from what had been an extended hospital stay, as far as the bear knew. Niel hadn't asked for the details of how the Richards had covered

up the hospital situation, but he'd needed to know some of it; like he'd been transferred to a specialty hospital in Eau Claire and that they'd figured out what was wrong with him.

The Coach hadn't asked for Niel's version, but since his return, the bear kept muttering under his breath about lack of dedication to the team. Not having his head in the game, not pulling his weight.

Niel couldn't be sure it was about him. The coach was always on someone's back for not being 'enough'. But he'd been growing more certain that football wasn't where he wanted his future to go, so looking into other scholarships he qualified for was a good idea, just in case it was him the coach was considering kicking off the team. Or maybe Niel should step away. Football had never been the only way he could go to university, just the surest when he'd ended high school.

"Hey Leslie," a senior called. "I knew you were a quitter."

Niel gave the jackal the finger. "Go fuck yourself, Carlisle." He paused as he realized what he'd said. "Oh, never mind. You can't. *You* are doing No Nut November." Niel grinned. "Or have you quit too?" He continued to his seat and dropped into next to the cougar.

"Where did you learn that level of burn?" Brendan asked, grinning.

"Just luck." The raccoon smirked, too. He could hear the discussion ahead, questioning if Carlisle was also a quitter.

"He's going to find a way to make you pay for that embarrassment. You know that, right?"

Niel shrugged. "After this weekend, I'm not going to have any reason to be within sighting distance of him. He's going to have to do a lot of work to get to me."

"That still leaves two days."

Niel grinned. "Turns out, I have plans for those days already and they don't involve being anywhere near him if we're not playing."

Brendan watched Niel speculatively, but the raccoon simply kept on grinning as the bus got underway.

* * * * *

"That's what I was talking about!" the bear yelled as they walked to the locker room. "You played like professionals, and you brought the victory and honor to your school!" the players, Niel included, cheered. It had been a hard game. The Bisons had brought their A-game to the field both times, but Niel and company had brought their A+ game, as the coach had proclaimed when he was interviewed just before they left the field. He'd head off to more interviews while the rest of them showered and changed. And after that, the MVPs would have their fifteen minutes of fame.

They were all seniors, and Niel was okay with that.

"Alright, Jackson, Hitory, and Carlisle, I want you ready in thirty minutes. It's not just the reporters who will be listening to you. You impressed people today, and this is your chance to impress them even more. Who knows? Maybe one of them will decide you're the one they want for their team once you graduate."

Another cheer. Niel joined in. He was happy for them, even Carlise. If professional football was what they were aiming for, he hoped they got it.

With the coach gone, the ribbing started, but it was playful. They'd won, so there was no hard feeling for the bad plays that had happened.

They were in the locker room when the guys in the front fell silent. Niel did his best not to smile when he saw Erwin in his team's football jersey, and nothing little else. He had underwear on, not that

the other guys saw that since the shirt was oversized to the point, it went to the rabbit's knees. Erwin had wanted to be naked underneath, when he and Niel had concocted the plan the night before, but the raccoon had vetoed it.

"You won!" the rabbit exclaimed, giving his voice and movement only a hint of the stereotypical flamyness attributed to gays. "You were great!" Erwin approached the first of the players, who happened to be Brendan. "I love how you handled that ball." He ran his hands down the cougar's chest. "And you," he rubbed against Carlisle, who was too stunned to protest. "That pass." The rabbit shivered. "You could send me to the deep end like that anytime you want." He was on to Chunho while the jackal was still sputtering, unable to say whatever he intended. Erwin leaned in and made his voice sultry. "How about you tackle me and show me how good you are with balls?" the rabbit winked at the lion.

Niel cleared his throat. Erwin could go on all day. He loved playing up the stereotypes. "Hun?" everyone in the room looked at Niel at the same time as the raccoon did. While Erwin beamed with joy, the other would be picking up their jaws off the floor if this was a cartoon. Erwin was a really good-looking guy.

"You were amazing!" the rabbit jumped into Niel's arms and the raccoon twirled with him. There had been no specific plan, beyond making the others jealous, but Erwin had warned Niel he'd be putting on a show, and to be ready to go along with it.

"Not so much you weren't looking at the rest of the guys."

"I can window shop, can't I?"

"That was a lot of touching, for window shopping."

"Well, you have seen them, right? How was I supposed to resist?" The rabbit leaned in and whispered in his ear just loud enough the closest guys could hear it. "How about you take me and make me forget anyone other than you exist?"

"Here?" Niel asked, shocked out of the role he'd been trying for.

Erwin giggled. "Well, after a game like that, I'm sure they all deserve a celebratory show."

Niel got over the surprise enough to somewhat get back into character. "What have I said about sharing?" out the corner of his eye he saw Brendan covering his mouth, trying not to laugh. Well, there was one who'd caught on.

"Only if they can go at it all night, and are talented enough to make me orgasm just by using that trouser snake they carry in their pants?" he leaned back until he could see Carlisle. "How about it, handsome? Came you go at it all night? And make me cum over and over just by pounding me with your—"

"I'm straight," the jackal exclaimed, having finally found his voice.

"Oh, honey, so is spaghetti. Until *I* get it all hot and wet."

"I think he had other plans," Niel said. "He has to be in front of the cameras in something like twenty minutes."

"Shit!" the jackal yelled and ran for the show. The other two followed him, still looking stunned.

Erwin looked around, his head still hanging back. "Will anyone else give my stud of a man a run for his money? Do any of you think you can win me away from him? I can do amazing things with my tongue," he offered, and Niel shivered. That one was true. "No one?" He straightened. "I guess I'm all yours." Then he kissed Niel as if they were lovers who had been apart for months.

Niel found himself squeezing that ass in response and Erwin squealed, pressing himself against him.

Laughter broke the moment. “Oh, you guys should see your face,” Brendan said. “I think a few of you have to start questioning your sexuality.” He broke down in laughter again.

“I think this little show’s over,” Erwin said, dropping the act, but not letting go of Niel. “Did you tell him?”

Niel shook his head. “He’s my roommate.”

“Ohhh,” the rabbit leaned back again. “Have you experienced the wonder that is Niel Leslie?”

“Can’t say that I have.” The cougar wiped at his eyes.

“Do you want to? I’m not the possessive type.”

“Got a girlfriend, but thanks for the offer.” He sighed. “I haven’t laughed this hard in a long time. I gotta thank you two for that.”

“I’m sure she would—”

“You’re channeling Limbani now, Erwin.”

The rabbit straightened. “I would never! I have criteria beyond male and equipped.”

“And self-control, since you are still wearing something.” Niel quickly reached under the long shirt and the rabbit eeped as he ripped the thong off, then brought it out. “Since I am not doing No Nut November, I will leave you to your ministrations, and we, will find ourselves an out-of-the-way cranny to celebrate this victory. If I’m not at the bus when you’re ready to leave, tell the coach Erwin’s driving me back.”

“I’ll have him home by bedtime,” The rabbit said, “in a week or two.” Then the two exited the locker room with their arm around each other’s waists.

* * * * *

“That was so fucking hot,” Niel said as he pushed the rabbit against the wall of the deserted, whatever this room had been used for. It was empty, except for the two of them, and Erwin’s jersey on the floor.

“I told you it’d be fun.” The rabbit until Niel’s pants.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard.” Niel kicked off the shoes, then they had to pause in the manhandling of each other and laughed as they fought with the shoulder pads and protective pants and.

“You’re wearing a cup?” Erwin asked, surprised.

“I was playing a football game, not getting ready for bed. Of course, I’m wearing a cup.” He hurried out of it. “Was wearing it.” He lobbed it over his shoulder and had his hands on the rabbit again, pushing him against the wall. The ground crotch, the precum getting them slick.

“You want me on the floor?” Erwin panted.

“Fuck that.” Niel grabbed the rabbit’s ass with both hands and pulled him up.

“Fuck, I love strong guys.” He wrapped his legs around Niel’s waist and the raccoon ground his cock between the ass cheeks, slicking it with precum and looking for the right angle. “Right there!”

Niel pushed in and thrust as Erwin because vocal.

“Fuck,” Niel panted. “I’m going to make you cum just with my cock.”

“I don’t fucking care how you do it. Just fucking make it happen.”

Niel thrust harder, pressing his stomach against the rabbit’s cock. Maybe that was cheating, but

the instruction to make it happen had been pretty strong.

“I thought I heard someone.”

Niel froze.

There was no way. They were in an unused part of the stadium. Erwin had checked.

“Do you mind?” Erwin demanded.

“Can’t say that I do,” the guy replied.

Niel looked over his shoulder in time to see the doberman pickup his jockstrap off the floor and press it to his nose, then rub his cock through his jeans.

“Okay,” Erwin said. “I didn’t see this one coming. Seems like we have a fan. You want to watch or join in?”

“Erwin, we don’t know the guy.”

The rabbit shrugged. “You’ve had the anonymous hookups. And he’s good-looking. And, yeah, definitely interested.”

Niel looked again, and the doberman’s cock was out of his pants. Hard and thick and long and... Niel swallowed. Well, like Erwin said. He’d had anonymous hookups before. “You a top, bottom, or switch?”

The doberman puffed his chest out. “I am definitely a top.”

Erwin rolled his eyes and Niel agreed, but so long as he could perform, he could put as much bluster in his statement as he wanted.

“Okay, then there’s an ass here ready for your cock.”

Instead of a cock, Niel got a lubed finger pushing in. At least the guy was considerate. He reached behind with a hand, using the wall to support most of Erwin’s weight, and found the big cock and stroked it.

“Oh, yeah,” the dog whispered in his ear. “Handled it. Soon it’s going to be in you and you’re never going to want another one again.”

Niel closed his eyes and hoped it wasn’t going to be that kind of talk the whole time. He didn’t mind the dirty talk and people acting tough, but if this turned into him being his bitch or anything resembling that, he was ending it.

The cock left his hand, then he groaned as it pushed in his ass. “Nice.” He let the thrust push him into Erwin, and when the doberman pulled back, he did so too.

“Fuck, that’s a nice ass,” the man said. He placed an arm over Niel’s shoulder and reached to tweak his nipple. Niel moaned. The man picked up speed, and Niel thrust faster into Erwin as a result. The rabbit’s eyes were closed, a contented smile on his face.

A new sound registered behind, by the room’s entrance, and before Niel could work out what it was, the hand let go of his nipple and the arm tightened around his neck.

What the fuck? Erwin let out a yelp of surprise as he fell, Niel being pulled away by the man whose cock was still in him. He hadn’t signed up for breath play.

Niel elbowed the doberman in the stomach hard; he let go and staggered back. Niel turned to face him and demand to know what he thought he was doing, but two others entered the room, a wolf and a fox.

The fox ran at him. “Restrain the other,” she ordered. “I’ll deal with this one.”

Then she was moving like this was a martial arts movie and Niel had to back away with each

blow to avoid taking their full force. Playing football had taught enough physics to know that one, but nothing else about how to fight.

And why the fuck were they attacking them. Was this about like what had happened seven years ago? It couldn't be. The guy had had his cock in his ass. He swung as hard as he could at her. She grabbed his wrist, moved, and then Niel was off-balance, putting a foot under him at the last moment before toppling over.

A cry from Erwin had him look in that direction in time to watch the doberman let the rabbit fall to the ground, his head at an odd, unnatural, angle.

Had they just killed—

Pain erupted at the back of his head, then he was falling forward and into unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty-One

Niel woke to a headache, pain in his shoulder and his wrists, and being bounced about. A violent one caused his arms to be pulled back and woke him fully. He tried to lower his arms, only they were held in place. His wrists were manacled together, and that was tied to the wall of the van.

What was he doing here? The last thing he remembered was him and Erwin, then that doberman and—He closed his eyes at the memory of the rabbit on the floor and fought to keep his stomach from heaving its non-existent content. Maybe, hopefully, he'd seen wrong.

So he would have something else to think about. He studied his surroundings. The van was on the long side; he was restrained closer to the front, and the radio was playing soft music. He could make out someone in the passenger seat, but no details from this angle.

That back had a few sheets spread on the floor, under him, and—there was someone else near the doors, restrained to the opposite wall by one wrist. Niel opened his mouth to call to them and closed it. The driver and passenger hadn't noticed he was awake yet. It might be best to keep it that way.

Which meant there was no way for him to talk with the other guy. Other naked guy, like him. Did it mean anything that they were both naked? Niel had been attacked in the middle of sex, and the... Pallas cat been too. If they could talk, he could find out.

He rested his head against the wall and whispered under his breath, "fuck." What was this about? There was no way this was pissed off fans. Niel hadn't been involved in any of the winning plays.

The pallas cat was looking at him.

He knew him, Niel realized. What was Fedor doing in the back of the same van as him, also restrained?

Niel opened his mouth to ask, but Fedor shook his head. Right, they weren't alone. The cat touched his ear and lowered his hand. He did it again.

Ear-low? Was it some kind of charades Fedor was hoping to sue so they could talk? What did ear low mean? The cat did it again. He felt it was important then. Low hear? Low hearing? No, Niel knew Fedor heard perfectly well. He narrowed his eyes. It couldn't be. What were the odds?

He kept his voice as soft as possible. "You can hear low sounds?"

The pallas cat smiled and nodded.

How come no one had told him Fedor was Society? Or was he? They weren't the only magical community out there. He didn't know who they were, so that wasn't going to be an easy conversation. Still, he could confirm or eliminate one.

"Society?"

Fedor shrugged and wobbled his hand back and forth. Not really? Almost? Maybe? This would be so much easier if Niel had the same power as the pallas cat.

No, way.

"Survivor?"

The stunned expression on the cat was confirmation enough. He pointed to Niel, who nodded. Fedor went to speak, but closed his mouth. They were in the same boat of not being able to have an easy conversation.

"What happened?" Niel whispered.

Fedor shrugged. He made a ring with the thumb and index of the restrained hand, and more the other index back and forth through it. Sex. He rubbed the back of his head. Hit there.

So same as Niel. "How many?"

One finger.

Not exactly. Then again, Erwin had—he closed his eyes and fought the memory, but the whine escaped anyway.

"What are you up to back there?" the passenger asked, with a faint accent Niel thought was German. He leaned in the opening to look at them; a dalmatian.

"Keep your mouth shut," the driver said. "Unless my cock's in it."

"Fuck off," Niel exclaimed. "You don't get to kidnap me and then expect me to do what you fucking want."

The dalmatian grinned. "Actually, we do." He tapped something on his phone and Niel screamed in pain. When it stopped, he was panting. "How about you, kitty-cat? You need a demonstration, too?"

Fedor shook his head energetically, eyes wide in fear. More like terror, Niel thought.

"Good. You two do what you're told, and this will be uneventful."

"Unless I need some relief," the driver said.

"No sex with either of them. You know the orders," the dalmatian.

"You going to tell them?"

"You're fucking right, I will. I do what I'm told. And I've been told that they can't have sex while they're in the van."

"Fine, then when we stop for lunch, your ass is mine."

Did that mean they knew both of them needed sex to live? And if they weren't going to let them have some, were they going to let them wither away? Fuck, how long were they going to be traveling?

Niel considered yelling at them, but he looked at the manacles where the pain had originated from and thought better of it.

* * * * *

The hose's water was fucking cold, Niel thought as it hit him, but he didn't try to get out of the jet. He was weak from the long two days without sex and filthy. He hadn't eaten a lot with his teammates, but he had to eat something when they went out after the first victory to celebrate. His body hadn't reacted to the food, then, and he'd gone to the bathroom normally, so the next morning he'd had a more normal breakfast with the team, and then had been the game and then the post-game celebration and his kidnapping.

His captor hadn't been considerate enough to make a pit stop when he had to go.

The driver turned out to be the doberman who'd nearly choked him.

He forced himself to move so his backside was hosed down thoroughly since he only had the water pressure to scrub him. They hosed down Fedor the same, not that he'd done anything. Maybe the pallas cat didn't care to fit in and eat, or they'd gotten to him after he'd already emptied his bowels.

"You're late," the doberman called to someone out of sight.

"You try crossing the border without anyone finding out what you're carrying," the unseen man replied, "let alone do that without any warning you'd have to do it."

A wolf stepped into view and looked in the van. "Couldn't you be neater about it?" Niel forced himself to look beyond them to get a sense of where they were. Two days of driving without stopping could put them just about anywhere within the US. It was warm so, somewhere south.

A boat sounded its horn, forcing the canines to stop talking.

"I wasn't given the details, only that the ship mine was to be on got stuck being inspected and this one's the only alternative, since they aren't interested in waiting."

"Then let's get them packed so we can get out of here," the dalmatian said. "I hate this country."

"Watch it," the doberman said. "This is my country."

"This place isn't the Fatherland, and you should be fucking happy about it," the dalmatian replied.

"You two need help with them? Mine's nice and pliant at this point."

"Probably should," the doberman said. "It's only been two days for them and this one was having sex right before, and he might still be a problem."

The moment they undid his restraints from the wall, Niel shouldered the wolf aside, but the doberman planted an elbow in his back and Niel dropped and didn't have the strength to get up again.

"Told you."

Two of them carried him around the van and into an open shipping container. He was dropped on a pile of blankets, then his restraints were attached to the wall. Fedor was restrained the same way. This time both his hands were over his head, at the front, and when Niel's sight adjusted to the dim light, he saw there was a third kidnappee.

They locked eyes and recognized each other.

"Dario?"

"Shut up," the doberman ordered. Then closed the door, sealing them in darkness.

"Niel?" the capybara asked. "How are you here?"

"I should ask you that. How did they get you?"

“I go to Buenos Aires with father for meeting. Meet wolf, talk, have sex, wake up tied in trunk of car.”

“Same, and for Fedor too. From when they said, it sounds like they know we need sex.”

“Yes. Wolf makes sure to fuck me only every few days.”

Something dropping on top of the container made Niel look up, but it was pitch black inside, and he was inside. Grinding and metal against metal. Were they going to crush them? That was a lot of work if all they were going to do was kill them.

The container shook, then moved.

Fedor said something in Russian.

“Shevet?” Dario demanded, as if he hadn’t noticed him until now. “They send you out to get good blood to put cum into? Or you so…” he let out an exasperated sound, then said something in Spanish.

“Not speak Spanish,” Fedor replied calmly. “I not sent out. I leave. I not want make same as father and mother.”

“You left family?” Dario exclaimed, his accent getting thicker. “How you do that? What of brothers and sisters? You not honor…” Another exasperated sound, then a string of Spanish. “You should be home!”

“Home is wrong,” Fedor snapped back. “Stay, do same wrong thing. Thing change, or—”

“Family!” Dario yelled. Then he continued in Spanish.

“Enough!” Niel yelled over him. Now he was happy Spanish wasn’t the language he’d picked. “Not to point out the obvious here, but we’re in trouble. Arguing can wait for after we’re out of it.”

“Da,” Fedor said. “Want escape.”

“I do too,” Dario said.

“Good. Can either of you magic us out of here? Maybe use the magic to get those manacles off? If we can fuck, we should be ready for whoever opens that door.”

Fedor sighed. “Not know magic. Not trusted. Fedor too… independent.”

“I have no cum,” Dario said.

“Can’t you use blood?” Niel had a conversation, somewhere in the many memories the bat had given him where that had come up. He couldn’t bring up the details, but he was confident there had been something about blood being used too. This was the first time Niel wished the clarity of the memories that had been there when Donal had pulled them from where they hid in his mind hadn’t faded with time.

“I…” Dario shifted. Strained. “Cannot write *Fraser* to open. Too long for what I reach.”

Niel sighed. It had been a long shot. “Do either of you have any idea?”

“In the silence that stretched on and on, the container shook loudly as it was set down.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

They were on a cargo ship; that was clear. And somewhat deep into the mountain of containers by the fact the only light he saw was provided by their captors. Pictures of those ships made it look like the containers were stacked as tightly as possible, but that could have been a trick of how far the camera needed to be to see the whole thing, or even a portion of it.

Or they were in a hidden portion within the whole. After all, they were being smuggled outside the country, and probably into another. Nothing he'd overheard made it sound like this was a last-minute thing, so the ship either already was, or had been, altered to allow hidden compartments.

Fortunately, there was barely any swaying from the water. Niel didn't know why, he was just happy not to have to find out if not having any food in your stomach made throwing up less of a bad experience.

The fear of dying from sex starvation was alleviated within hours of being locked up, once the noise of other containers being loaded grew faint enough to only be rumbles felt through the metal floor and walls. The dalmatian from the van entered the container holding a survival lantern and proceeded to suck each of them off, before sitting in a lounge chair and reading or watching videos on his phone.

Niel had initially been surprised being sucked off had made him feel better. He was told he needed sex to live, and to him, that had meant full-on penetrative sex. Guys in the Society did suck others off, but that was on top of all the sex they had. If sucking had ever been part of the information he'd learned on the Society, from the memories the bat had given him, he'd forgotten in the two years since.

Of the three, the dalmatian was the one Niel would try to turn to his side if he had any idea how to go about it. Movies made it sound like the moment the prisoner talked with their captors, the bond was forming, but that was movies. He didn't think real life happened the same way.

The other was the doberman.

Niel had enough of him even before he fucked and called him all sorts of denigrating stuff. He'd

really been holding back when he'd joined him and Erwin, before the kidnapping thing. He fucked each of them while he was there, and played the alpha male and top to the level it qualified at toxic.

The third was a collie, and as far as Niel could tell, unlike the other two, he had no interest in them, not even being around them. He checked in on them, took the chair outside, as well as the heater, once it was cool enough it was needed and closed the door. With enough noise Niel figured he latched it, not that Niel could get out of his restraints to find out.

They agreed to sleep during the dalmatian's shift, right after the blow job, endure the doberman, not that there was anything else to do about it, and talk when the collie left them alone.

The conversations quickly devolved into Niel listening to the other two argue once they'd gone over a more detailed explanation of how each had been captured. Sex was the bait, strength the method for him and Fedor. While Dario was suffocated since, it turned out, the Cuevets' family power was that they were indestructible. They could feel pain, of a sort, but the knowledge it didn't leave to anything had led to it becoming more of a signal others might get hurt in this situation than anything that could overwhelm them.

When it came to working out an escape, or talk of a rescue, the ideas were pretty slim. Niel was the most likely to overwhelm a captor since he was the stronger of the three. Dario was quick to point out that being indestructible didn't mean he could hit anything. He was studying to manage money, not fight. Fedor didn't like fights because pain really hurt. The Shevets' family power was that of heightened senses, which included tactile, and pain receptors.

As for a rescue, Fedor didn't have anyone who'd miss him enough to do more than ask around the university for him. If his family had known where he was before this, they would have sent someone to retrieve him. Dario was full of confidence about his family and the Medeiros realizing he was missing quickly and then looking everywhere for him, even using magic to find him.

Then Fedor delighted in asking why he was still here and pointing out the odd hand-crafted items adorning their captors. He didn't know if they were the reason, but if magic could rescue them, it would have happened already.

Niel was also confident his friends would look for him once they realized he was missing, and with Kuno and his family, they could bring strong magic to the search. The problem was the Erwin had told the team he was going to bring Niel back later. No one would believe a week or two, but Niel didn't have classes on Monday, and while he wasn't a slacker, he enjoyed his fun enough that not showing up on Tuesday because he was with a guy wouldn't raise enough suspicion to launch the search. Wednesday would have been when his absence would be questioned.

Unless someone discovered Erwin? He forced himself to consider that angle as painful as it was. Would they have left the body there? They seemed too organized for that stupid of a mistake. How hidden from magic would it be?

By Tuesday, Niel was already in the container and on the ship. He didn't know how long it had been before they set to sea, but like Fedor, he figured that if they would be rescued, it would already have happened.

They'd have to come up with their own escape.

If only they could think of something.

* * * * *

Time lost a lot of its meaning when it was spent entirely chained inside a container with nothing

to do, and quickly running out of things to talk about. He caught glimpses of the outside when they changed watchers, but it never changed, a gray container in the light of survival lanterns the three captors used.

Niel knew they were getting close when their captors withheld sex. By the time the distant rumble of containers being unloaded was felt, that left him weak, and the dalmatian complaining often about the doberman in German. As with the van, he was used if the doberman couldn't fuck the three of them. In the complaining, Niel made out something about a hope the other guy would take up some of the duties, but the collie was no more interested in the doberman than he was the three of them.

He might be straight, Niel decided.

The container was banged on, then it shook, and they were swinging about, concern about being seasick back. It was put down roughly and Niel readied himself by remaining still and as comfortable as being chained let him. He wanted to appear unconscious when they entered. Let them unchain him and then... well, he'd muster as much strength as he could in his state and make a run for it. All he needed was a phone. One call to Kuno and all he'd have to do was wait. His friend would rescue him.

Instead of the doors opening, there was more noise of something being done to the trailer. Then they were moving.

They'd put the container on a trailer bed. The noise had been them chaining it down, or whatever they did to them before driving off. He hoped it would be a quick drive because Niel was weak. He only had one experience with being starved, but Dario told him they had around a week before they died. But as Niel had experienced, the weakness came on quickly.

The moving eventually stopped, and he heard voices through the walls. A lot of them and he couldn't make out what they said until he realized they weren't speaking English, but German.

Score one for elective language classes.

One door opened, and Niel half-closed his eyes and slumped. A wolf looked about to climb in when he saw him, looked at the three of them, and dropped down, exclaiming something. Niel had trouble understanding, with how quickly the man spoke. Something about clothing, the public, and something about nether. Maybe he should have kept with the German after high school.

What the incident revealed was that there were more people here than he'd expected. He'd expected the captors as well as maybe one or two others. He heard closer to a dozen voices answering the man. Enough, he had no idea what they were saying. He changed his plan. He couldn't simply shove whoever untied him aside and run for the door. He needed to be more strategic.

A wolf, a pekingese, and a labrador climbed into the container. The way they were dressed made Niel uncomfortable, although he wasn't sure why. The clothing had enough similarities to mark them as belonging to the same group; had a bit of a military feel to it. Mostly dark grays with black highlights. Lots of sharp angles.

The pekingese undid the manacles and Niel let himself fall. He tried to pick him up, but even without the muscle mass, Niel would out mass the small man at least two times. He resorted to calling for help.

Dario tried his own escape but was easily brought down by the labrador. Fedor offered no resistance. A doberman, not the one from the trip, at least, climbed in and helped carry Niel out.

Outside, at least a dozen people, all in the dark gray, with black highlights that nagged at Niel's

memory were working, moving boxes out of vans and into other rooms in this... warehouse? Niel couldn't see enough of the cavernous room to know. What he did notice, which added to the nagging, was that everyone present, except for him, Fedor and Dario, was a canine. Most were men and the few women there seemed to be in subservient positions.

Niel was happy his eyes were nearly closed when he finally realized what had been nagging at him. What historical groups did he know about where being a canine was of utmost importance and where women weren't quite enough superior to qualify as more than helpers? Who loved dark gray and black and sharp angles, for some strange reasons?

He'd never had an interest in studying them, but it was impossible to study history and not have to read up on them. Fuck, just the previous week he had, as part of trying to learn more about Jarod.

The three of them had been kidnapped by fucking Nazi. Or more likely Neo-Nazis. Still, he couldn't believe these people still even existed.

He forced that out of his mind and cracked his eyes open again. He needed to get a sense of where the exits were. He saw plenty of doors, but they all looked like they led deeper into the building, except for two, both with dirty windows in them and daylight on the other side.

He said a prayer to God, then to Him, and put a foot under himself and shoved his weight against the doberman, pulling the surprised pekingese off-balance in the process. Guns were pulled, and that helped his adrenaline spike and get him moving for the closest door. He didn't care about being naked and contemplating being in public. Right now, being arrested for indecent exposure was more appealing than anything a bunch of fucking Nazis might want with him.

With the door approaching, he checked for the hinges; on the other side. Good. He readied himself to shoulder it, ignoring the yells behind him. A mix of German and English, telling him to stop.

Like he was ever going to obey that order.

The door opened a moment before he reached it and he only had the time to ready himself to shoulder into someone, instead of something, before he impacted him, and bounced off and onto his ass.

"What is going on?" the large husky with pale gray fur demanded, before looking down on him as Niel struggled to his feet. Fine, This wasn't the first time he'd had to deal with a quarterback who was larger than he was.

He fainted to the left and ducked to the right, passing around the husky, only to receive an elbow in the back that sent him crashing face-first into the concrete floor.

"I do not think so," the husky said, his accent thickening. "Too much work has gone into getting you." The man's grin was nasty.

Niel didn't get much time to wonder why he was so important to Nazis. The kick across his head saw to that.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Niel came awake to an aching jaw. Right, a boot to the head. Not a maneuver he'd ever experienced on the football field.

He cracked an eye open. He was in a room this time; the walls were bare plaster, the floor some of white linoleum with scratches where a desk might have been at one point. He was chained again, but this time to a U-bolt between his legs, so he could jerk off if he felt like it. If he could get the pants off.

Because someone had dressed him. Gray dress pants that had seen better days. A shirt that had what looked like oil stains on it. Fedor and Dario were similarly restrained and dressed, and a german sheppard had been added to their group.

The door was closed, and he didn't see cameras, but anyone could have an ear pressed to it. "Fedor," he whispered, "can we talk?"

"Da," the pallas cat replied at a normal volume. "No one close."

"Hello," the german sheppard said, with a look of concentration as he raised a hand to wave, then let drop.

"What's wrong with him?" Niel asked.

"He is drugged," Dario said. "He is a Stuber. They are strong. So they make sure he does not break out."

"Wieland," the german sheppard. "My name is Wieland."

Fedor said something in Russian that didn't sound flattering, and Niel glared at him. "We'll in this together, so how about we don't restart how you two passed the time on the way here? We're on land and in a city. Now we have a chance to escape and call for help. But not if all we do a bicker."

"Thun," Wieland said. "This is Thun."

"Where is that? I figure we're in Germany, but beyond a bit of the language, I don't know much about it."

The german sheppard shook his head. "Switzerland."

"Do you know why we're here?" Niel asked. "Until now, I thought it might be about me, somehow, since I'm the common point between these two, but I'm pretty sure we've never met before."

Wieland shook his head.

Niel rested his head against the wall. His jaw hurt just from talking. He raised his hand to massage it, but the chain wasn't long enough, so he leaned forward. As he pulled back, he looked at his hands, at the length of the chain.

"Dario, you know sigils, right? You have room to move now. Do you know any that can get these off?" He shook the chain.

The capybara thought about it, then shook his head. "I am not a soldier. I know frase for sex, for stamina, for honesty, for work without sleep."

"But you know sigils, can't you cobble something together?"

Dario shook his head. "That is dangerous."

"More dangerous than what we're in?"

"Yes."

Niel stared. He didn't enough to call the capybara out on it, but it was magic. That stuff should be able to get them out of anything, right? Why hadn't that damned bat included one set of memory where Niel was a member of the Society will all the knowledge that came with it?

No point in dwelling on a failed play. What else could they work with?

"Is there any chance we have more than our family's power to work with? You know, like the how in the Society everyone has their individual powers? I mean, we are part of them."

"We have a Different agreement," Wieland said.

"We are not Society," Dario said. "We are Survivors. The Society makes us part of them because of Him. We all follow Him. And the Society wants to be one. So they take us, and tell us we are part of them." As the capybara got angrier, his English deteriorated until he spoke only Spanish.

"Da. Not same. Just same god."

Niel nodded. "So, if we could get these off, all we have is Dario's invulnerability, but he doesn't know how to fight. Wieland is strong, only he's drugged and can't use it. You have enhanced senses, which, since you shirked away from fighting or any threat of violence against you means pain is also really strong?"

Fedor nodded.

"And I don't age." Niel thought about something. "Wait, do I just not age, or is it that I can't be killed?" his jaw hurt a lot, so he didn't heal, but—

"There is little known of Irvine's family," Dario said. "The Irvine power. Jarod has no son until you. He keeps away from all. He does not empower the sons his daughters have."

"Okay, but why hasn't anyone else done it?"

Dario shrugged. "I do not know. Patriarch would decide. Maybe Medeiros says not to do it." He shrugged. "I am only a son of a son of a son of a daughter. I am not told things like that." He sighed. "This is not something that happens to one as me. I do not matter."

"All Matter, to Him," Wieland said. "We are important because of Him. We have a duty to Him and those of us. You matter. We all matter."

Niel looked to Fedor, but the pallas cat tilted an ear in amusement. Right, this wasn't a movie where everyone did a soliloquy on their personal philosophy of life.

"Okay. Whatever the reason, we're here. They think we're important enough to kidnap. Wieland, please tell me I'm wrong when I think these guys are Neo-Nazis."

The German sheppard snorted and cursed. "Nazis are scums. They are scum." He nodded to the door and the motion sent him off balance. "They make trouble at the college. They are arrested. Germany has no love for Nazis, but they don't stop. They harass me and my friends who are canines. They say that any one of us not fighting with them for 'Germany' is a traitor. They don't fight for Germany. They fight for power to oppress anyone different. They are who took me, in the night while I sleep. I woke to the sting of a needle, and fought until I was weak."

"Why us?" Dario asked.

"Because we're Survivors?"

"We do nothing with Nazis," the capybara stated.

"Actually, the Survivors sort of exist because of the Nazis," Niel said. "The expedition that went to Antarctica was in response to one the Germans sent. Someone thought they saw something there, so the Germans went to investigate and a researcher at Oxford got wind of it and wasn't going to let them get the glory. That's how Jarod ended up there. So there is a connection there. I just don't know if that's got anything to do with this."

And that seemed to be all they knew as a group. Dario knew some of his family's history, but nothing going back that far, Fedor and Wieland not even that. It was sobering to Niel that not everyone had his interest in history.

A few hours in trying to piece together some form of narrative out of the nothing they knew, Fedor told them people were approaching, then the door opened and a group of men entered. Two went to Fedor and Dario, and four to Niel and Wieland. While none of them held the guns, Niel was quite aware of them in holsters. The thought popped into his head of reaching for one, but he squashed it. What chances did he have, even if he got one out, of taking out twelve men who had to know how to use a gun, while he didn't?

The sting of the needle distracted him. The man who'd pricked him smiled and spoke in a gentle tone.

"Now you don't get to cause trouble for anyone."

Then Niel was unchained and pulled up. Two held him, and as they walked, supported more of his weight as Niel found it difficult to get his legs under him. By the time he and Wieland were put in the back of the same van, Niel couldn't get his body to obey him. At best, raising a hand could be accomplished, but the effort left him exhausted.

"Where are we going?" Niel asked of the driver. The only other person in the van, when he started driving. "I didn't go yet. You're going to have to help me when I need to go."

The driver muttered something in German too low for Niel to understand, but Wieland chuckled.

"He thinks you think he's an idiot."

Niel shrugged. "It's not like I have anything else to do, and at this point, I'm willing to try anything if there's a chance it's going to get me out of this." He paused. "What's it like for you and your family?"

“What do you mean?”

“Dario’s family lives with the Medeiros, there’s tensions there, and Fedor’s family is isolated somewhere in Siberia.”

“You?”

Niel sighed. “I don’t know that there’s a family in my case. I mean, there’s me and my dad, but my biological father wants nothing to do with me, not even explain with it means to have his blood running through my vein.”

“There is little to say of my family, either. It is large and strong. My father is an engineer. We do not have the drama that seems to be in the other families. We are a normal family.”

Niel nodded. Maybe not everyone who was in a magical family had drama worthy of bad television. Once this was over, Niel would go back to school, get his history major, become a teacher and make sure he was forgotten by the rest of the world.

He chuckled.

Wasn’t that what Jarod did?

Maybe he got that from his father.

#

Chapter Twenty-Four

The cold hit Niel as the back of the truck opened, and he and Wieland were pulled out. Niel had slightly more coordination, but not enough to attempt an escape. The German shepherd must have received a larger dose because he didn't offer any resistance.

They were carried through a compound with wilderness beyond it. Hundreds of men doing exercises reminded Niel of military movies. These men were in uniform. All in dark grays and blacks. Niel searched the buildings and was surprised not to see a swastika. The building they entered was concrete and undecorated. Each room inside it had doors made of bars and he was put into one, with Wieland across the aisle from him. Neither Fedor nor Dario were there, and Niel hoped it meant the truck they were in was delayed, and not... the alternative.

He reminded himself they'd kept each of them alive all this time, so they weren't about to simply kill them.

Not yet anyway.

A woman came and dropped an insulated jacket on his cell and Wieland's. Niel called to her, but she averted her eyes. He told her how he couldn't move to put it on, but if she understood him, she didn't react.

He tried to remember details about how the Nazis treated women since this was clearly what this group was emulating, but this was where his lack of research into that group worked against him.

A few minutes later, the pallas cat and capybara were delivered, already wearing jackets—lucky them—and placed in their individual cells. Niel tried to get one of the guards to put the jacket on him, but they also ignored him.

He worried about hypothermia for the hour it took his body to return to his control enough, then dragged himself to the jacket and put it on. Wieland had his put on by the guard who came in to administer his next injection.

Then, they were back to waiting.

* * * * *

Niel strained to listen. The guards on the other side of the wall were talking, something about hoping this was worthwhile. The other chastising the doubter. They used what felt like titles for whoever was in charge, but Niel didn't recognize the words. Not that his vocabulary was all that large. Unless they used Fuhrer, he doubted he'd know what the title meant.

There was something about waiting for— now they were out of range.

Not particularly enlightening.

"Are you hearing anything useful?" he asked Wieland before walking around his cell. The jacket helped keep the worst of the cold at bay, but it was nowhere near warm.

"No. Only chit-chat about missing home, about not looking forward to the walk."

"If we go, why wait?" Fedor asked.

"We're missing someone, that's what I think mine said." Niel paused, and it clicked. Or at least he hoped it did. "There are five survivor families, right? And there are only four of us. That has to be who they're waiting for."

"Suzuki," Dario said.

"What can you tell me about them?"

"Kishu, Japanese."

"What's going to be his power?"

"Precision."

"What does that mean?"

"It's hard for them to miss," Wieland said.

"So like marksman?" That would be useful.

"Maybe. I don't know details. Never met one."

Niel sat. "How are the Survivors different from the Society?"

"Different agreement," Dario answered.

"I mean beyond that. Why only us? Why not any one of them? It can't be just because of Him, since the Society follows Him too. I don't see how it's our powers since, other than being certain what they'll get from us, there has to be someone in the Society that has a version of it. So why us? And why now?"

"You," Fedor said.

Niel snorted. "I'm not that important. I'm just a university student with an interest in football, history, and guys."

"You are Irvine," Dario said.

"Leslie," he corrected.

"You have Irvine blood."

"I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one."

"But you are only man with power," The capybara said.

"Jarod has is. He's the original afterward."

"Jarod is untouchable."

"What does that mean?"

"I am not certain. Something I overhear Patriarch say. Jarod is beyond touching. Revered."

Niel had trouble imagining the man being worshiped. “You’re saying that until I came alone, whatever this was couldn’t happen because no one would dare try to grab Jarod.” He thought it over. “I don’t think Nazis would give a damn about someone’s status if they needed something.”

“I am saying what I hear.”

Niel nodded to himself. “Okay, if we say that’s true, you realize the level of coincidence needed for them to then grab two guys I know out of the five they need.”

“I at university,” Fedor said.

“I wasn’t in Minneapolis when they grabbed me.” But it meant they could have seen Fedor and him together. That was a stretch. They’d been together, what, twice? And at the party, it would have been impossible for someone to link them, considering the number of guys each of them had had sex with that night. “How did they even know about me?”

“I do not understand.”

“I can count on one hand the number of people who know who I’m related to, let alone that I was initiated. Is one of them in league with the Nazis?” He couldn’t imagine Roland or his brother even contemplating helping these kinds of people. Olavo? Definitely not. Who was left? Dario and his side, but why? Grant?

Niel didn’t know the kangaroo, but he’d helped Thomas, was keeping Victor safe. Until the Chamber’s attack, that farm had been hidden from all kinds of prying.

Something Grant said came back to him.

“Do any of you know about the Chamber? Or the Practitioners?”

“Who are they?” Wieland asked, after the others said they didn’t.

“Another faction. A group of them helped the original members of the Survivors with something.” He massaged his temple. “I’m running after passed that have been caught. I’m tired. My mind’s going all over the place and making connections where there are none.”

“You should sleep then. You will think better after.”

“I’d rather wake up and find out all of this was a bad dream.”

* * * * *

“Wake,” Fedor hissed loudly. “Wake.”

“I’m awake, Coach,” Niel replied, straightening. It was pitch black, it was cold. It wasn’t a dream, he remembered. He swallowed the curse.

“What did you hear?” Dario asked.

“Truck,” the pallas cat answered. “Excitement.”

“I guess they got the kishu here,” Wieland said.

Before Niel could comment, the door to the concrete building opened and orders were given. Order for them to get ready to move.

Wieland tried to protest when two guards entered his cell and mustered enough coordination to shove one against the wall hard, but the motion sent him to his side and the other injected him before quickly exiting the cell.

The german Shepard cursed in German until his speech became slurred. An argument started among the guards and all Niel could make out was something about quantities. In the end, they pulled everyone out of the building, and tied the german sheppard’s arms around Niel’s neck, forcing them to carry him. Fortunately, Wieland wasn’t particularly heavy.

They joined a kishu under guard, hands tied behind his back, and then they were marching out of the compound and onto a trail. There were flashlights as far ahead and behind as Niel could see. And enough around him to make out that the trail had been well trodden, but not particularly wide.

Or course they were going to walk where they were going, Niel thought. It would be too easy for there to be a nice paved road for a truck drive up there.

At least he had experience with early morning running. He hoped the others would fare as well.

* * * * *

The sun rose as the trail moved from being among trees to the side of a mountain and Niel wasn't in a mood to appreciate what had to be a beautiful sight. He had experience with runs in the early morning, but Coach Horgar had never had him do them with close to two hundred pounds of unconscious german sheppard on his back.

A call of unsteady terrain came down the line and was even translated into English for their benefit.

Maybe that would take care of it for him. One slip and this misery would be over for him and his passenger. Would it, though? He didn't have a form of super healing, but no one could tell him just what never aging meant. Just how horrible would it be to be broken at the bottom of a cliff, but unable to die.

Still... if Fedor and Dario were right. He was the linchpin to this whole thing. Without him, they only had Jarod as the person with initiated Irvine blood. And either because his biological father had mystique or some form of protection, they weren't willing to touch him. They'd have to let the others go, right?

Wieland grumbled something incoherent.

Not everyone.

If Niel went down, he'd have no choice but to take the german sheppard with him. Suicide to save others was one thing. Murder was another. Maybe if he could ask him, Wieland would be okay with it, but then the Nazis around them would hear and as much as he wanted to believe Neo-Nazis would hate anything western to the point of never learning English, this was the twenty-first century. And he'd already heard some of them speaking English.

He trudged along as the sun rose higher and higher. When a Nazi came to administer Wieland another injection, Niel considered shoving that person over the edge, but his intent had to be visible because before approaching, he made sure he had others with him.

Somewhere around noon, the trail widened, and the terrain flattened. Then they headed away from the cliff. Not long after that, they were entering a cavern, at first natural, but quickly, Niel saw more and more signs people had worked the stone, enlarging the passage until he lost sight of the walls on each side in the torchlight.

Then it widened even more, and Niel couldn't help the whistle that escaped him as man-made ruin became visible when they crested a mound. Stone buildings were partially fallen. Electrical lanterns lit a path down the mound, and other lanterns were placed around the area, where the Nazis gathered.

Instead of being led to one of those, Niel and his group were ushered along the path until the back to the cavern, lit by more powerful lights, came into focus.

A massive stone door was carved into the wall and on it was the stylized face of a wolf. At the foot of the door was a dais with five pedestals.

Niel already had a bad feeling about it before he could make out the details carved on each of the pedestals. One had a capybara, one a pallas cat, one a raccoon, one a german sheppard, and one a kishu.

“Bad,” Fedor said, “this is bad.”

#

Chapter Twenty-Five

Niel was held by, of all people, the doberman who'd kidnapped him before the pedestal with the image of the raccoon carved on it. This close, he could make out that the man depicted was older and with an air of refinement. He wouldn't be surprised to see on any academic who spent more time in research than teaching. Possibly because the few pictures Niel had found of Jarod had been in black and white, but he could see the resemblance with the face carved into the stone.

Did this mean it wasn't the meeting with a god that had made him younger, but something had happened over the following years? Did it mean Niel wouldn't be stuck looking like an eighteen-year-old for all of eternity?

He looked at the Neo-Nazis assembled in the large chamber. If things went wrong, it was possible he'd be eighteen for whatever was left of his life.

Like him, the others were held before their corresponding pedestals, although Wieland was draped on it as he still couldn't stand unaided and his guard didn't seem interested in doing that. He could make out the capybara on his left and the kishu on his right. The ground they stood on had also been worked, a carved circle with lines that connected each pedestal, as well as going to the edges and criss-cross each other. There was a sense of purposeful geometry to them, but he couldn't make them mean anything.

The volume of conversation shifted among the crowd, growing excited. Even his personal guard was looking back at the cavern's entrance. A powerfully built man advanced with an entourage of a dozen other men. When they were close enough, Niel recognized the husky who'd taken him down on that man's left, the others were all unknown to him.

The man in the center, the leader, if Niel was willing to bet on it, was a wolf with a brown and gray coloring. Whistles and hooting welcomed him, fists pumps. The husky looked annoyed at the display, while the wolf took it in stride.

The group stopped a dozen feet from the pedestal. The wolf looked over the five of them, a

satisfied expression on his face Niel wanted to punch off. He was younger than Niel expected. Younger than his dad. Early forties at most.

He turned his back to the pedestal and addressed the crowd. In German.

Niel's guard cursed, in English, and the raccoon fought his amusement, before focusing on trying to understand what was being said.

The man's voice was loud and the words clear. A professional orator. He spoke of pride in the fatherland. Of a quest decades in the accomplishing. Of a relic brought back from a far land. Of the rebuilding of their people. Of perfecting who they are in the image of the original Wolf-Dogs—and here is motioned to the door. Of glories of old, and glories to come. Of raising Canidae above all others, where they belong.

No mention of Hitler, so that was good, right? His guard looked bored, and Niel wondered if he could body check him out of the way and run. His chains had enough look so he could walk, and so long as he was careful he shouldn't trip. Unfortunately, there were a few hundred people between him and the exit, and for as many guns as he saw, he doubt any of them would kill him and ruin this oh-so-wonderful moment.

The man brought a rousing speech to an end and cheers erupted. He moved aside and the husky stepped forward. When he spoke his words were direct, clipped. Instructions not to be disobeyed.

The seal would be broken, then Alpha Group went it. Beta, Gamma, and Delta would follow. The rest of the units would stand at the ready, but only enter if one of the principal groups called them in.

He looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with Niel before looking at the crowd again and instructing them not to dispose of the keys until the relic was in their leader's hand, but that if one of them became unruly, they were authorized to hurt them as required.

"Oh great," Niel grumbled. Not only was he relegated to the status of an object, but one that could be bent and scratched, so long as he still fit the lock.

"If he's hitting on you," The doberman growled. "I swear I'm going to kill you."

Niel look at the dog and smiled. "Wow, so that's who you're a bitch for?"

The doberman's fist was raised and wound back.

"Stop!" the dalmatian ordered, holding Fedor. "If you aren't going to do what you're told, you should have stayed in your country."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do because I don't understand German." The dumb-ass was damned loud for being unsaid.

Niel snorted at the names the dalmatian called the doberman in German. "It is time to get them to break the seal." He pushed Fedor toward the pedestal. "You do know what needs to be done, correct?"

"Yeah, yeah," the doberman replied dismissively. "Hand around the heart so it will be pumping again." He shoved Niel toward the pedestal. "Ain't a hand in a heart I want to be pumping."

"Feel free to bend me over and fuck me," Niel offered.

"And strengthen you? I don't think so."

Closer, Niel searched the pedestal. He'd initially expected whatever their role to be to involve something on it, but the hand to the heart thing led him to think it would be lower. Then he saw the heart-shaped cavity in the top of the pedestal and he stopped.

It wasn't a cute heart like he'd find on a valentine's card. It was in the shape of a real heart, with arteries and veins branching out from it. Fedor was protesting too, while the kishu batted his guard's hand away with something that sounded insulted and shoved his hand in it almost in defiance. Wieland hardly reacted to having his hand pushed in, and Dario simply did as instructed, looking resigned.

Niel glared at the doberman. "Just try forcing me to do this."

The doberman grinned and reached for Niel's shoulder, but the raccoon took a step forward and slammed his shoulder into the man's chest as hard as he could. Hard enough he knocked him off his feet. Before Niel could take advantage of the situation, he had a revolver in his face.

"You enjoy causing trouble," the husky said.

Niel smiled and forced himself to ignore the cry of pain from Fedor. "Why don't you go ahead and make me pay for my insolence?"

The husky seemed surprised at the comment, then shrugged and pulled the hammer on the revolver. Niel was stunned his improvisation worked, before realizing the gun holding hand dropped before the gun fired.

In the silence caused by his ringing ears, Niel's nose was tickled by the scent he guessed was gunpowder. Then he sneezed and pain erupted from his leg. Then he was on the floor calling the husky all sorts of names.

"Get up," the husky told the stunned doberman, with enough disgust in his voice it pierced through Niel's pain. "Get him to the pedestal, if he does anything more, kick his leg." Then he left.

The doberman grabbed Niel by the shoulder and pulled him up roughly enough he screamed at the pain it caused his leg. "When this is over, I am going to fucking make you pay for making me look bad," he growled in his ear, shoving him against the pedestal. Niel forced himself to look at the others, Fedor was a crying mess, the kishu looked stunned at how Niel was treated, Wieland might be unconscious, and Dario didn't look up from the pedestal.

Niel help on to it for support, he wanted to glare at the doberman, but the hand was way too close to his leg. He gritted his teeth and put his hand in the hole at the top of the pedestal. There was an instant of relief that the inside was dry and rocky, then something clamped down on his hand, locking it in place. He tried to pull it out before the next part happened because he figured that wasn't going to be—he hissed at the pain that added to his leg.

"Fuck," he hissed. He hoped this wasn't going to take too long, because it was starting to—the room shook, the doberman jostled Niel's leg and after glaring at him, Niel followed his and the other's gaze toward the door. If he was suffering like this to get the think open, he was going to see what it revealed.

And then the floor dropped out from under his feet.

* * * * *

He screamed in pain. It wasn't in terror of the fall, or the idea of what hitting bottom would be like. It was only the pain of his leg and the needles in his wrists. He fucking had the hole in his leg to prove he was in pain too.

The light above them went away as the whole dais left behind closed. Someone screamed, above them, that was definitely pain.

The fall slowed, and the doberman let go of the pedestal.

Niel punched him in the face as hard as he could, then was screaming and cursing at the added

pain to his hand, and the shift in position that pressed his injured leg against the stone.

The doberman sat up and glared at him. "I am going to fuck you—" something fell on him, splashing blood.

No someone, half of someone, Niel realized, his pain numbed brain oddly detached. The doberman made the same realization and freaked out, shoving it away and backing until he was against the side the Dias was dropping into.

Then it came to a slow stop.

Something clicked, and his wrist was released as soft lights came on, illuminating seven Neo-Nazis regaining their balance, one pallas cat in the ground, cradling his arm and crying. Dario still looking at the pedestal as if he'd checked out. Wieland was checked out, unmoving on the floor and the kishu was—

The Neo-Nazis trying to grab the white dog screamed as the smaller man took his wrist and twisted it. He glanced to the side at another Nazi, kicked something off the floor, and after a ricochet, a chunk of stone hit the man in the face and dropped him. The kishu tripped his guard, helped him down hard and only the kishu stood. Talking the gun off his belt. Instead of using it, he lobbed it at Niel.

"Catch."

Niel tried, but the throw was wide and his leg buckled under him, and with another scream of pain he fell back, into a Nazi's way, tripping him, and cursing the entire time. He realized the gun was next to his hand, grabbed it, and hit the Nazi with it until he'd worked out his frustration with the situation.

"Feeling better?" the kishu said.

"I will once someone tells me they know a healing sigil and they can use it on me and Wieland. Fuck getting shot hurts."

"That was very brave of you." The kishu gave a small bow. "I am Isamu. Isamu Suzuki. You are of Irvine blood?" He knelt next to Niel.

"Not by choice." Niel looked around, from his vantage point on the floor, he could see three unconscious Nazi, which he was confident hadn't been handled by his companions. He looked at the kishu. "Precision, huh?"

Isamu looked at him quizzically.

"Fedor said your family's power is precision."

"That is not the right word." He took Niel's palm and traced a sigil. "The bullet went out of your leg, so this is safe to do."

"So what's the right word for being able to take out a bunch of guys without moving from your where stood?"

Isamu shrugged.

Niel sighed in relief and the pain went away. The kishu left him and went to see the others. He closed his eyes.

"Irvine." Isamu shook his shoulder.

"Five more minutes, Coach."

"We do not have more minutes. I need your help."

Niel sighed. "It's Niel, Niel Leslie. Irvine's just my biological father's last name." He stood and took a tentative step. His leg was sore, but no more than that. He followed Isamu to Wieland, who was

still on the ground, unconscious. The Nazis they passed were restrained, and Fedor was busy tying another one of them. Dario was seated, holding his knees.

“Why haven’t you healed him?” Niel asked.

“Broken leg. I do not know the greater healing *phrase*. Must set first or heal wrong.” The kishu took hold of the german shepherd's knee and indicated the ankle. “Take and pull.”

“I don’t want to hurt him more than he is.”

“Take more strength than you have to rip leg. It aligns bones, then I heal him, then we leave.”

“It’s going to be hard to do with chains on.” Niel took then ankle, and after a hesitation, he decided it was best to get it out of the way quickly and yanked on it. Wieland whimpered for didn’t otherwise react.

Isamu handed him a set of bloody keys. “They are for the chains. From him.” He indicated half a body, then he was tracing sigils on the german shepherd. Niel took off his chains, then undid those around Wieland’s ankles.

“You okay?” he asked Dario.

“I should not be here. I am not important.”

“Most of the time,” Niel said, “it’s the people who aren’t important that matter.” He found the right key and took off the chain. “We’re going to be okay. Isamu’s pretty bad-ass, and it isn’t like we have to worry about food. The five of us just need sex, and the Nazi...”

A white hand offered him a gun. “For Nazi,” Isamu said.

“What? No. We’re not killing them. I was just saying we don’t need to stress. The danger’s up there, and they can’t get to us.”

An explosion sounded above them.

“You need to survey what you say,” Dario said, chuckling.

“It’s watch, and yeah, I really should.” Niel looked up. “You think that with our blood unlocking things whatever other magic that kept them from just blowing up the door is gone too?”

The kishu shrugged.

“Maybe not the door,” Wieland said, Fedore helping him walk. But this,” he indicated above them, “will not be as strong. We cannot stay here.”

“Door there,” the pallas cat pointed to an opening on the wall.

“We’re inside some unknown german ruin,” Niel said with a sigh. “About to set out into the unknown. Yeah, that’s what I’ve always wanted to be,” he said, dejectedly. “Indiana, fucking, Jones.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The short hall ended in a stone door with what could be waves carved on it. Or at least that was what Niel chose to believe the undulations were. It was locked, and even Wieland, with his strength, couldn't force it open.

"So, magic?" Niel asked.

"Or old," Dario offered.

"There is magic up there." Isamu pointed up. "Why not down here?"

"How do we open it then?" Wieland asked Niel and the others looked at him.

"What?"

"You are Indiana Jones, Da?" Fedor smiled. "Love Michael as actor."

"Philistine," Niel said, which confused the pallas cat. "Ford is the only Indiana Jones. I guess the sarcasm didn't make it through the language barrier." He sighed. "Look for holes we can put our hands in. It might be made to look like a body part or something."

He searched along the floor, using one of the flashlight they'd taken off the men tied and left in among the pedestal.

"I found something," Dario called, shining his flashlight at a section of the wall. He rubbed some of the surface stone off once they were gathered and letters appeared. Quickly two phrases were revealed, with a polished space beneath each. One was in German, the other in English, and Wieland confirmed they asked roughly the same question.

#

Where did it begin?

#

"Antarctica," Wieland said.

"Where what began?" Niel mused. "*It* is kind of vague. If it refer to the Survivors, then you're right, but does it refer to the expedition? Or maybe the event that caused the expedition to start?"

“It is search for power,” Isamu stated. “It is always search for power.”

“The history told to me is that expedition is about research. Knowledge,” Dario said.

“Knowledge is always power,” Isamu stated.

“That is true,” Wieland agreed.

“Not know,” Fedor said. “Family not talk about Antarctica. Bad times.”

“How is it written?” Dario ran a hand over the polished stone.

“Carved?” Wieland offered.

“I hope not,” Niel said. “We don’t have anything to carve with. Unless you’re strong enough to scratch away stone.”

The German shepherd rang a finger over it. “Strong enough? Maybe. But I’m not resilient enough. I could use Dario.”

The string of insults the capybara replied with was clear, even if it was all in Spanish. Wieland and Fedor chuckled.

“This is made by Survivor,” Isamu said. “Then Survivor magic is needed.”

Niel looked back at the room the pedestals were in. He couldn’t deny Survivor blood had been used to unlock it, but the work seemed elaborate for five men to do. Maybe he had that part wrong and there had been more than five people to survive? That was the problem with oral history. No way to be sure.

Wieland cut himself and wrote Antarktis under the question in German. Niel did the same, writing Antarctica under the other question. They looked at the door.

“That is start,” Isamu stated.

“But it’s not the answer to the question,” Niel replied.

“Maybe Cum?” Fedor asked.

“The blood brought us down,” Dario replied. “And Blood is His. It is vitality and potency.”

“Yes,” Wieland said. “Blood will work.”

“So Antarctica isn’t the answer.” Niel rubbed the blood off with his shirt and it came off surprisingly easy. Almost as if the stone didn’t want it there. It didn’t want the blood or the words? Like stone could want anything. Except that magic was now involved, so it might very well have some say into what stuck or didn’t.

Again, Niel was annoyed that magic wasn’t making things simpler. It had always felt that way when watching the guys at the frat use it.

“If not Antarctica,” Isamu said, “where they leave?”

“How precise must it be?” Wieland asked. “Germany and England, or the cities, or maybe the ports?”

“What could the people who set this up expect those coming to unlock it to know?”

“Everything, if Survivor,” Isamu said.

“There’s four of you here. None of which knows anything about that time,” Niel replied.

“You are Survivor,” Dario stated.

“Only for a few weeks now, and it’s not like Jarod even expected me to come about. As far as he’s concerned. He doesn’t want anyone to follow in his footsteps.” Get used to losing people, the younger-older raccoon had basically told him on the subject of his mother dying of cancer. Wouldn’t

that make him want to have others around him who wouldn't age?

Did he make that decision back then, or after he started losing friends and family? The consensus, from what he'd been told, was that Jarod had taken himself away fairly quickly, so it might have made the decision right then. If, like the Nazis believed it needed to be his specific blood line that was part of unlocking this, Jarod had been present when this was made. If he'd already known he wouldn't have a blood line, he'd expect to be the one to unlock this.

Or, he'd planned for the possibility someone else would be here and...what?

Fuck, he wished he knew the man better.

What would he do? Niel wondered. If he'd been the one here when this was made. He wouldn't age, but that wasn't a guarantee he wouldn't die, right? If he went with the assumption he might not be able to be the one to unlock it. He'd want to make sure someone he believed in would be able to work it out. Niel would give them the tools, if not the direct knowledge.

Only Jarod hadn't given him, or anyone else anything.

But Jarod had been an archeologist. Would he consider history? Someone willing to study the past? If so, it would be something that was part of the historical records. The countries felt too broad. Anyone would be able to guess that.

They others were watching him. "The city or the port."

"Which are?" Wieland asked.

Niel looked at them. How did none of them—

"Norddeich," Isamu said, "is where the Germans left from." He shrugged at the look the german shepherd gave him. "I remember a story told to me."

"Bournemouth is where the English expedition started from," Niel said. "I read it in a book," he added before anyone questioned how he knew.

He and Wieland wrote their respective location and waited. When nothing happened the german shepherd pushed on the door. Which didn't move.

"The name of the ports themselves?" Wieland asked.

"Those are the ports, not just the cities names." If not that, what else could it be? The historical records ended with them getting on their respective boats.

Would that be the actual start?

"Try Seeliger, Wieland, that's the name of the boat they traveled on." What had been the British boat? Right. Knight of the Water.

They each wrote theirs in fresh blood and immediately, something happened. The blood turned dark and pealed, then flaked off as if something vital had been taken from it. Grinding came from the door as it slowly opened. Wieland went to push on it, but it wouldn't open any faster.

"What about them?" Dario asked, pointing to the tied men.

Isamu spit something in Japanese.

"Leave behind," Fedor said. "Not trust them."

"End," Isamu said hatefully. Niel didn't want to know what he'd been through to feel that way.

"Let's just leave them there. Their friend up there are bound to find a way down here, so they'll be fine. If not, once we get out of this...place—not calling it a tomb—we can send people back in for them.

Unlike the room the hallway was dark and damp; surprisingly so, considering the other room

had felt dry. The flashlights illuminated a flat floor, and mostly flat walls where the undulating patterns were carved again.

Niel shone the light up, looking for vents explaining how the air wasn't so stale as to be unbreathable. There were stories of tomb being opened for the first time and the first people in dying because the air had turned poisonous over time. This had a dustiness to it, but more that of an empty room, rather than a place unseen for nearly a century.

The next room lit with a soft glow and this time Niel made out the markings on the walls that emanated it. Definitely magic.

"Sigils?" Niel asked, and stared at his breath fogging before him. Was it that cold? He breathed out and more fog appeared. The other did the same. Fedor hugged himself and seemed to shiver. How sensitive was he to cold?

The room was large, circular with six columns around the center of the room. Maybe twenty feet from it, he guessed. Other than those, the only other thing was a rectangle block of stone next to a column. A grid was carved in the floor each corner touching a wall and the rest surrounded by more undulating lines. Someone really loved those.

On the other side was another door, and as he approached it, Niel realized the cold emanated from it. Wieland tried to push it, but like the previous one, it didn't move.

Signing, Niel looked around. No obvious clues. "Look around for something telling us how to open the door."

"Grid has numbers," Fedor called. He pointed to the edge, and each line of the grid had a number. Zero at the middle one, then going up or down by ten depending in which direction he looked.

"Cardinal grid," Isamu said.

"Map," Dario said, then looked around. "Six columns, one altar. It is an hearth."

Niel had to search through the memories the bat had given him to figure out why the word was familiar. "It's the places of power for the Society, right?"

"And Survivors," the capybara said. "We make pack in an Hearth. That is where we start."

"Okay, how does that help us open the door?"

"The stone is light," Wieland said raising one end of the altar. He considered something. "Lighter than I would expect, it is still too heavy for one of you to lift."

Niel looked at the stone block, then the squares of the grid. It would fit in one of them. "Anyone know the coordinate of the Hearth the Survivors were in?"

"Antarctica," Fedor said.

That was what Niel was afraid of. They had thirty-six boxes per line, he had no idea how many latitude the continent took.

"We try each one," Isamu said, indicating the southern edge of the grid. "And we find the correct one."

No one had a better idea. The four of them were needed on one side to lift it, while Wieland held the other on aloft and they moved it from squared to square. It was lighter than it looked, Wieland was right, but still far heavier than any of them. So there was no chance they could stand on the right one and use their weight. How many people would be needed, if Wieland hadn't been there?

Forty-seventh was the one that opened the door, and Niel considered not continuing. What would the next one be like? Carrying a rock to the top of a mountain over and over again? The cold

pushed him forward. Even if he was immunized to pneumonia, which he had no idea if he was, the others might not be.

The tunnel was light, with a green-blue tinted light that reminded Niel of pictures of broken icebergs, or a winter snowfield right after a storm, and the sun high. When it started down, Niel realized that the undulating design hadn't left the room with the grid. Like they were in a different place.

Like they were no longer on water.

Was that what this was? A representation of the journey the people who'd become the Survivors had taken? They'd gotten on the boats, traveled to Antarctica. That could be why it was so cold. Then they had... been stranded on the continent, had to seek shelter, ended up underground and going deeper until they finally found the Hearth and Him? Would that be the end? The exit, or something else. No one had told him anything about what had happened within the Hearth, or then they had encountered Him and made a pact. He didn't expect a god to be waiting for them, but there had to be something right?

The angled became steeper, which made the ground being stone instead of ice fortunate. The light remained constant.

How had they built this?

It could have been there before the Survivors and they repurposed it, but the pedestal and that descent had been powered by their blood, or at least activated by it. Was there crafting magic the Original Survivors hadn't passed along to their descendants?

Crafting.

What was it Grant had said? Practitioners had helped the Survivors with something. That was how he knew the existed it was part of the lore he'd been told. If he understood things correctly, crafting was what the Practitioners did. Was this what they had helped with?

Why?

And why would Nazis want to get in here if it was a Survivor thing? It couldn't be because they wanted to have sex. Nazis and gay sex wasn't a thing, or so they had claimed. Of course, he knew a few Neo-Nazis who were into it, so maybe?

Then what about the leader's claim of canidae? Niel rubbed his temple. He was trying to hard, he suspected. Fanatics would latch onto anything. It was probably all just a fantasy.

When the path leveled, Niel had no idea how deep they were. Miles, maybe? Then they were in a circular room with six pillar, an altar in the center and... a door slamming closed behind them. Well, a slab of stone dropping to block the one way out.

Indiana, fucking, Jones.

"Alright, lets look for the next clue to this fucking place."

* * * * *

An hour later, or was it two, maybe a hundred? No closer to two. Niel hadn't had sex in a while and didn't feel about to keel over, so he was still in the hours range, not days.

He had nothing. There was no ceiling, or it was beyond the light provided by the room. The pillars ended at twenty feet with the ceiling nowhere in sight. There was a gap between the floor and the walls that led Niel to think this was like the dias, but he had no idea how to get it to go down.

Everyone dealt with the frustration differently. Isamu was throing pebbles, bouncing them off the walls in complex patterns, muttering under his breath until they landed back in his hand. That was some

superhero level power, Niel thought. Wieland paced the edge of the room, kicking the slab in the door each time he passed by it. Maybe he could make a hole, in a century or two?

Fedor and Dario were screaming at each other. Again.

Their animosity had taken a back seat to getting out of here, and now that they were at an impasse. Their tempers had flared. Twice before Niel thought they'd come to blows as insults in Spanish and Russian flew back and forth. Fedor understood Spanish, but Dario not Russian, which infuriated him even more and made him scream louder.

"Will you to just fuck already!" Niel yelled. They probably all should but he wasn't in the mood, which should be blasphemy both because he was a Survivor and Niel Leslie. He was always in the mood for sex. "We get it, you hate that he left his family and you hate that he's doing everything his family tells him. You're Society, so fucking deal with this the way they do and fuck! So the rest of us can hear ourself think!"

Lo and behold, after glaring at him the two ripped their clothes off and were fighting for who'd be on top. Fedor won, and by the tone of the Russian he spewed while pounding the capybara's ass, he was bragging about it.

Watching them, Niel found himself getting hard. Maybe all hope wasn't lost. Isamu seemed either amused at their antics or insulted. Niel couldn't tell. Wieland looked at them, then continued pacing.

Okay, so Niel was going to have to wait until those two were done before he got a turn. He could wait, a little while.

Fedor's pounding became erratic and Niel got to his feet. They were going to—the pallas cat screamed his orgasm and the room shook.

"What the fuck?" Niel looked around and noticed the entrance had gone down a foot.

Isamu was looking at the same thing.

"Sex is the key?" the kishu asked.

"Okay course it's the fucking key." Niel could slap himself. He'd had it on the way down and just thrown it out. What had happened when the Survivors had made it to the Hearth and met Him?

They'd fucked.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Niel was bent over the altar, Wieland pounding him hard from the back and Isamu fucking his face. The kishu came and Niel held him in place while he milked the cock. When Isamu staggered back, Niel caught sight of the open door, level with the floor.

It wasn't the first time he'd noticed it, in between and while fucking, but it hadn't been level before and this time, when Wieland groaned and tensed, cumming, the room didn't groan and move up another foot. The german shepherd pulled out and Niel straightened. Dario was stepping away from the pallas cat, a satisfied smirk on his face and Niel decided to enjoy one last ass before they continued on.

"There is a door," Wieland pointed out. "Finally. We're here."

Even Fedor looked up from where he was sprawled.

That last ass would have to wait, and it could be the first of the next orgy. He slapped it on his way to his clothes and Dario turned that smirk on him.

"I will do more than smack," the capybara promised.

"So will I." Niel hesitated before getting dressed. His fur was matted with cum, and he'd never been a fan of not cleaning up as quickly as he could. But no one had considered providing showers in this place. He didn't zip the jacket once he had it on. The temperature here was more cool than outright cold.

The other side of the opening was dark, and they had to resort to the flashlights again. Immediately, statues of wolves were revealed on each side of them, holding showed with the point in the ground. Behind them, sealed alcove lined the wall.

"What is this?" Dario asked.

Niel shone the light up. The ceiling was twenty or so feet up, unevenly rounded. Carved into the stone. "Catacombs," he answered. The path extended before them. Behind them the opening into the now dark sex elevator was in an unfinished wall. It had been added to an already existing place.

Jarod and his palls had desecrated a burial site for... what the fuck would get at least one

person he knew for sure had been an archaeologist, a student of history, to do that to some ancient race's holy place? Because no one went to the extent of placing guards before the dead just for the fun of it.

Fuck he hoped this place wasn't cursed.

Knowing magic was real changed his optics on a lot of the old stories of cursed tombs. If he had had any interest in turning his history classes into archeology, that thought had just ended it.

"What do Nazis want here?" Dario asked.

"Power," Isamu answered.

"What power?" The copybara motioned around them. "There is only dead here."

The kishu indicated further down the path before starting that way.

What did the original Survivor have with them they wanted to hide here? Had He given them something to protect? Was that what the Nazis were after? What could a god of gay sex hand over that the Nazis would want?

They crossed a threshold, and the guarding statues were more ornate, wearing armor instead of clothing. Behind them, instead of seal alcoves, plain sarcophagus lined the wall.

"Why different?" Fedor asked Niel.

"Probably because they were more important. My classes are more on those who lived through out history more than how the dead were dealt with. I know social status was a think in certain culture's burials, but I have no idea who these people were. Wieland, do you know anything about an ancient culture of wolves in Switzerland?"

"Wolf-dog," Isamu said, while the german shepherd shook his head.

"Wolf-dog?" Niel studied the statues. "How do you figure, Isamu? These guys look like wolves to me."

"The men holding me spoke of clan of wolf-dog. Ancestors of all canidea. Pure, perfect." The kishu studied at the statues close to him.

Dead, Niel thought. How was that for perfect? He shook his head. Nazis had been delusional, and their Neo counterpart weren't anymore sane.

The sarcophagus became more elaborate as they proceeded, being intricately carved with drawing of someone's life after that they found themselves in the shaft of a stairwell spiraling up.

"Why more walking?" Fedor demanded.

"They should have made another elevator," Wieland said. "More fun."

"I don't think they wanted to damage the already existing structure," Niel said. "I question why not one of them brought this discovery to the world, since they were supposed to be scholars, but I think they still respected what they'd uncovered enough not to interfere."

"The other elevator?" Dario asked.

"It's outside the structure. I don't know if they came in through the entrance with the wolf face, then locked everything behind them as they proceeded, but that was the end wall of that catacomb. They made sure not to damage anything.

One hundred and three steps higher, they found a landing, and shining a light inside revealed more sarcophagus. They considered exploring it, but Dario pointed out they ahd not way to recharge their flashlights, so they agreed to continue up in the hope there would be a way out once they reached the top.

Niel continued counting he steps, and each landing was a hundred and three steps from the previous one. The sixth set felt outside, instead of another landing.

Or rather, outside of the stairwell, while still being inside the mountain.

On one side was a structure carved of, what else, stone. It might be carved into the stone wall itself, but their lights couldn't shine far enough to see the end. There was a definite sense of as building to it, with open doors and at the edge of their light what could be windows looking into the distant darkness.

There was a sense of something grand, with the way sound traveled and took a long time to echo. Stairs went down in a gentle slopes away from the structure with a guard rail on one side.

"Pitch," Fedor said, smelling his fingers. There was a bowl at their end of the guardrail, carved as part of it, and close, Niel saw a channel from it, continuing into the rail. He smelled it and it did smell like tar and other stuff, some of which made him think of when he was shot. Touching it, it was dry and powdery.

The palas cat rubbed something together and sparks came from them. When approached the bowl with it, Niel stepped back. Fedor repeated the actions over the bowl and sparked flew into it.

"I don't think that's how," Niel started after nearly a dozen times, and that was the one there something sizzled, and then fire build into the bowl, then followed the rail, illuminating it and part of the stairs. At the bottom, it seemed to pause into another bowl, grow, then leave in three direction.

Niel watched in amazement more and more of the cavern was lit in the soft glow of the pitch fire. It was much larger than he'd expected and seemed to be a city, with the channel of light stretching into every street. From their height, they could make out the grid the house were build on. The cavern ended what had to be three football field away at least, with a door where Niel thought he could make out the stylized head of a wolf. Or wolf-dog, if Isamu was right.

"That's the way out," he said.

"Finally," Wieland said.

Niel started down the stairs.

"There are Nazis behind it, correct?" Isamu asked.

Niel stopped. "If we open the door, maybe they'll just rush in after whatever they think is in here and we can sneak out."

"You will give them power?" the kishu asked.

"I doubt there's anything in here they want. If Survivors hid something here, it's going to be about gay sex. You really see that canidae are better than anyone guy actually willing to bend over and take a cock up the ass?"

Isamu bristled. "You do not know what is here. It will be powerful."

"No one knows what's here, Isamu. Those kind of people aren't interested in what's here, only what they think is here. They invent story to justify anything, convince their followers of anything. I'm telling you, this isn't going to be anything."

"What if you're wrong, Niel?" Wieland asked, sounding worried. "There's stories out there that He made weapons. That one of them was used during that Church thing a decade ago."

The kishu nodded to the german shepherd. "He is right. He makes power."

Niel wanted to protest. He wanted out of this place. See the sun, get a shower. But he didn't have the knowledge of the Society and Survivor's history they did. Kuno and the guys at the frat had

discussed the War with the Gray Church, but never in details beyond many of the Society families had suffered loses because of it.

“We get, we protect,” Fedor said.

“Or we use it to protect ourselves,” Dario said.

Splitting up in this situation was a mistake, so Niel nodded and climbed back up. “Okay. So if there’s something powerful, you figure its in there?” the pitch fire ahd made its way around and the building that had been hinted at before, was now cast in dancing flames.

Definitely a temple of some sort, with carving of wolves worshipping larger wolves. Looking at the adoration depicted, Niel could understand the Nazis, and their belief canines were superior to anyone, thought this place was important to them. He did wonder how they’d heard about it. Had one of the Survivors talked? Maybe had been captures and tortured for information?

Niel studied Wieland’s back as they walked into the temple. The German expedition had been send by sent by the Nazis, right? Didn’t that mean one of the Survivor had been Nazi? Hadn’t Wieland’s family always been in Germany? Other than being drugged, it wasn’t like he had been treated that badly.

The antechamber was large and the pitch fire revealed more passages to their left and right, but what caught Niels attention was the majestic stairs at the back, with the fire traveling along the guardrail and the much better illuminated room at the time.

“Up there,” Dario said.

At the top of the stairs, the fire went around a room with mummified wolves prostrated before a large leg bone floating in the middle of the room. Niel pulled his attention away from it to study the wolves. There wasn’t much left of the clothing they’d worn but despite what would be needed to build a city like this, there was a sense of tribalism to what Niel could make out.

The one exception was the man Niel noticed crumpled against a column, who hadn’t been visible form th entrance. He was a wolf, like the others and also mommified, but he was dressed in pants, shirtand a jacket that hadn’t had however long the other’s clothing had to deteriorate since these had been made in the early to mind nineteen hundreds.

Had this been one of the Survivors? As a wolf, and desiccated, he did resemble the others in the room. Had he believed he was one of them? Was he one of Wieland’s ancestors? There were no obvious injuries, so why had he remained behind? Had the others become wise to his treachery? If he was a Survivor, it would only have taken a few daus before he was too weak to do anything and a couple of weeks before he was dead.

Niel shuddered. He’s only had a few days of starvation and didn’t want to imagine what dying of it would be like.

“No,” Isamu said, and Niel turned in time to see Wieland grab the floating bone. A howl detonated from it, sending Wieland flying to the start of the stairs and forcing Niel to cover his heard due to how intense it was.

When it stopped, his ears were wringing. “Don’t touch it!” he yelled as they all ran to see to the german shepherd. “What were you thinking?” he demanded of the still shuddering man. The one Niel had touch hadn’t thrown him off with a howl, but he recognized the full body reaction.

“I thought.” The rest was incomprhensible as the german shepherd’s muzzle spasmed. “Use it.”

“We can’t use it. That thing’s a Practitioner staff. They don’t like having other factions touching

them.”

“Nazi not faction,” Fedor said.

“If we cannot take it,” Dario said, “we can not protect it.”

“There is power here,” Isamu said with pride, looking at Niel.

“Fine, you were right.” And he was wrong on more than that. Maybe he’d misunderstood Grant, or the kangaroo didn’t know the truth, but with that being a staff, then it was more likely that the Practitioners had asked for the Survivor’s help, and not the reverse.

He saw Fedor approach the staff, taking off his jacket. “Don’t touch it.”

The pallas cat said something in Russian, and threw the jacket over the floating bone. It hung then, until he took hold of the sleeves and pulled it to the floor.

“Wrap, not touch.”

“Use your shirt,” Isamu said. “Lighter, and easier—”

The ground shook.

“I think,” Niel said, looking around. “That whatever magic was making it impossible for the Nazis to get in, was centered on that staff.”

“Put back?” Fedor asked.

“No,” Isamu replied. “We wrap and take.”

“I think,” Niel started, and a very distant grinding of stone stopped him. He ran down the stairs praying not to see what he expected to see. Outside the temple he saw a crack of light in the distance. The door being opened.

Fuck.

He’d really preferred the Nazis had followed them down where the pedestal had gone. Now they’d let them in.

Inside the temple an argument sounded. Russian, then Spanish.

Come on. Couldn’t those two just stop? He turned and ran for the stairs, reaching the bottom as the argument turned into pained yells and someone ran down it. Isamu with the wrapped bone in hand.

Niel didn’t think, he hunched and set to tackling him down. Only to find the kishu miving with him, and using the staff to trip Niel, sliding under the raccoon, who then found himself face first in the stairs.

He cursed and pushed the pain aside. He looked up as he stood. Wieland was in the steadying himself against a wall.

“He is going to give the bone to the Nazi.” The german shepherd exclaimed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Niel chased after the kishu, not bothering with why this was happening. You didn't question the game plan while it was in action. You did your part, then you asked the captain what they were thinking.

He caught up to Isamu, then did what he knew and tackled the kishu to the ground, only to find himself dislodge and rolling away as Isamu got back to his feet as if he hadn't been interrupted. Fedor jumped with a scream and Isamu stopped, turned, and use the tip of the staff to redirect the pallas cat momentum.

Niel was back on his feet before Fedor crashed. Wieland(okay, if we want Wieland in this fight, we will have to make someone else grab the staff initially. Dario would be my choice) was catching up.

Before Niel reached for the kishu, Isamu used the wrapped staff to poke Niel in the chest and shoulders. The impact hurt, but Niel had been in enough tackle to be used to pain. That seemed to surprise Isamu, but not enough for Niel to get his hands on him. He side-stepped the raccoon and used the staff to guide him around and off-balance. When Niel reached for the staff, since it was right there, it was already gone, twirling in the air. The distraction let Isamu get in one strike and after a spike of pain, Niel found his left arm unresponsive as he crashed to the ground.

How the fuck had the kishu struck a nerve like that?

Wieland was in striking range, but Isamu moved too fast for him. The asshole was smiling the whole time, as if this was a game, and showing them he was the best was all this was about.

In the distance, sound of voices told Niel they were running out of time. They needed that staff and then to..., he'd make that plan once the staff was out of this traitor's hands. He pushed himself to his feet and forced his left hand to open and close. With Wieland distracting the kishu, he or Fedor should be able to get it.

Should.

Niel considered removing that word from his vocabulary after Isamu maneuvered him into the german shepherd this time. The previous one was into the pallas cat and before that, it was a punch

from Wieland that Isamu deflected into Niel. The German shepherd had pulled it at the last moment, but the raccoon now had a sense of how strong the Stubers could be.

He went on the offensive again, only this time, the first of the Nazis were close enough to join in. Niel was tackled before he reached Isamu. He shoved one off, but another took his place, and before he could get his arm between them, someone else grabbed it and held on.

In his peripheral vision, Nazis flew in time with Wieland yelling German curses. The cursing didn't stop even once the flying bodies did, and by the strain in the voice, the German shepherd was on his back and piled on too. Then he sounded slurred. And when Niel was pulled up, a gun in his side, he saw someone inject Wieland with a third syringe.

Fedor was on his knees, hands on his head.

Isamu dropped to a knee as the Nazi leader approached and offered him the staff. The wolf undid the wrapping on one end and smiled as he looked at the bone before wrapping it again and placing a hand tenderly on the kishu's shoulder, congratulating him for his work.

* * * * *

Another day, another cell.

Niel was getting more than fed up with being a prisoner as he paced the space that was his cell.

He and Wieland had been thrown in facing stone building which, despite their age, were still solid enough to withstand Niel slamming his shoulder into a wall. The doors were metal bars and a recent addition. Wieland would get through them easily, but he was back to being unable to move.

Niel dropped by the door.

"Do you know if Dario escaped?" Niel asked.

"Niet," Fedor answered from the cell next to Niel. "Still hurt when kishu run."

"How can he be in league with Nazis?" Niel demanded, outraged. "They're fucking Nazis."

"I don't think they are fucking anyone," Wieland replied.

"Ah, Ah. I'm not in the mood." Niel sighed. "So, I guess that means the Suzuki are in league with them. I mean, I know the Japanese were allied with them, but come on, it's the twenty-first century. Everyone knows better."

The hundreds of men who were in the cavern proved him wrong, but Niel was too angry with Isamu to let that stop him.

"No, they are not with the Nazi," Wieland said. "Isamu may not be one of the Suzuki either."

"But he had that precision power. Are you saying the Nazis found someone from another faction with the right power to pass himself off as them?" He tried to remember if the kishu had done Society magic. Niel thought he had, but those last... how many hours, anyway? Had been hectic enough, he wasn't sure.

"No. He has Suzuki blood," the German shepherd said. "But that does not mean he is part of the family. The official family."

"You lost me. I know a good number of Society members and if there's one thing that's clear is how important family is to them. Even Dario is like that, and you sound like it, too."

"Family is important," Fedor said.

"Not to the Suzuki," Wieland said. "They do not track who has baby with whom. They do not worry about a man with their blood being activated. There are many of them out in the world. Do not hold the family responsible for the action of one person." He paused. "Even if he is a true son of the

Suzuki.”

Niel nodded. That was good advice. People were responsible for their own actions, and when he got his hands on that kishu, he was going to wring his neck, regardless of what his fancy power let him do.

“Do you think you can move enough to kick your door out?” Niel asked. “If we can get out of here, we can lose ourselves back in the temple until they leave. It’s not like the three of us have to worry about food or water.”

“Kaboom,” Fedor said, morosely.

“Good point.” Niel sighed.

“I do not understand.”

“Once they’re done here, there’s no saying they won’t blow up the entrance. Sealing us in. I’m not looking forward to a century in here until someone else discovers this place.”

“Yes,” Wieland said, “I am missing my phone already.”

“I will be more than happy to remedy that,” someone said. A deep voice with a German accent, but also sounding refined. The Nazi leader stepped into view. Accompanied with the traitor. Isamu wore his gray and black uniform with pride and ignored Niel’s glaring. He turned with the wolf to face Wieland’s cell. “Should you finally see reason and accept to come into the fold. We are not unreasonable. Any canine will be given the chance to join.”

“Go fuck yourself,” the german shepherd said with vehemence, then switched to German, and his disgust at the man, the Nazis, and Isamu really came through.

The wolf nodded. “Yes, I suppose that is your choice. Isamu Suzuki, what do you believe we should do with him?”

The kishu shrugged. “Whatever we want?” All traces of Japanese accent were gone.

“Please be serious. I am curious as to how you believe we should treat people belonging to the same organization you came to us from.”

“These guys don’t belong to anything I’m part of.” The kishu’s English was good, Niel couldn’t hear any accent he recognized, but the way he enunciated made him think it wasn’t his first language. “As for what we should do, just use the staff on him. It’s not like we need his approval for that.”

“But there is no guarantee that it will make him one of the chosen.”

Another shrug from the kishu. “Then you lock him in a room and throw women at him. I know phrases that’ll get him to impregnate them whether he wants to or not. When they’re of age, I’ll initiate the sons and you’ll have soldiers whose strength will not be beaten by anyone.”

“Yes. Maybe we should simply turn him into a... what is the word, stud? He would be more useful as that. There will be plenty of the chosen among the believers.” The wolf turned to face Niel, glancing into Fedor’s cell. “What of these two?”

“Are you interested in having men who never grow old?”

The wolf looked thoughtful. “That would be a useful ability to grant those who demonstrate proper loyalty.”

“No, I mean men who, once I initiate them, will stop aging at the peak of their body.”

The wolf looked at Isamu. “You would let that into our ranks?” the kishu didn’t seem bothered by the disgust directed at him.

“No, honored leader. But I’m only a soldier. My role is to give you the information so you can

make the right decision. I would never think to let my belief in someone's inferiority take precedence over your understanding of their potential use to the cause."

Niel searched Isamu's face as he spoke. That could be the kind of speech one gave to convince a self-entitled asshole you were on their side. But there was no duplicity on the kishu's face. He believed what he said.

"Good. But no. There is nothing one of their kind can bring that would make polluting the master race worthy. So do not bother speaking of bringing the cat in."

Isamu nodded. "Then his role is simple. An ass for the men with that inclination to fuck."

"Dream on," Niel said, giving the two of them the finger.

"He will never age, so how long it takes for him to break isn't important. But the only way he will hold out is to let himself guy of sexual starvation, so he will give himself over, and in time, he will become used to his role, and he will even enjoy it."

Niel glared at Isamu. He hated that the kishu was probably right. Two days without sex was more than he ever wanted to go again, and people could get used to just about anything.

"What about this magic you can do? Won't they use it to escape if we let them live?"

"Neither of these two know any. I don't know about Wieland. He wasn't talkative about that part of his education. But I doubt any of them know more than I was taught."

The wolf looked at Niel. "Good." He looked away. "Take the Stuber away. Get him ready." Motion, then men came into view, unlocking the german shepherd's door and dragging him out.

One of the men left behind pointed to Fedor's cell and spoke quickly. Niel made out something about wanting to have fun, and the wolf nodded with a dismissive wave. Fedor protested, but after a cry of pain that made Niel think his arm had been ripped off, left, subdued, and without any visible injuries.

"Why?" Niel asked as Isamu turned to follow his leader. "Come on, you have to know he's never going to share the power with you. Men like him are only about using people to amass more power. He'd going to discard you the instant you aren't useful to him anymore."

The kishu paused while the wolf continued walking away.

"You think you can turn me against my leader?"

"I think you're an idiot for believing anything he told you."

Isamu smiled. "I'm smarter than you, considering where you are and how we played you."

(this will depend on sticking with the meeting being orchestrated. I figure that by this point Niel will have worked out it was orchestrated since the dalmatian will have shown up) "Oh like getting me to have sex with Fedor was so clever."

Isamu shook his head in amusement. "Your inferiority is showing. That is not what I am talking about."

"Look. I don't know what he told you to convince you to work for him. But men like him have shown up throughout history, and it never ends well for the people around them."

The kishu snorted. "What I want is already within our grasp. I will be one of the chosen, and I will be remade as one of the master-race. My body will then reflect my superiority over those like you." (I'm giving Isamu something of an inferiority complex as part of his motivation/reason for joining the Nazis. If you need this changed that's fine.)

Before Niel could add anything, the kishu walked away.

Great. Why are there always gullible people for the Hitlers of the world to take advantage of?

He sat down and listened to the retreating steps.

The stone walls and buildings quickly soaked in all sounds, leaving him feeling utterly alone.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Time was a strange thing.

Niel knew it couldn't be more than a day since Wieland and Fedor had been taken away. He too well how two days without sex felt, and he only felt a little of the hunger he'd initially confused with wanting food. So definitely not two days.

And yet.

Alone, in the dark with nothing to listen to other than his thought and the beating of his heart, he felt like it was at least a week since he'd been left alone. A week with the occasional nap and waking at imagined sounds. A week to consider what he could have done differently so that he wouldn't be in this place, feeling like a week had gone by when no more than a day had.

The first thing had been Fedor. If he hadn't had sex with him, he wouldn't be initiated and—only that was a lie. Olavo also had Survivor blood, enough the capybara believed he'd initiated Niel, and possibly he had. Had Niel had sex with the pallas cat or capybara first? How would he know?

So not being friends with Olavo was the solution.

Only that one was out of his control. The bat had given him so many memories with varying levels of friendship with each of the guys who had been at the frat back then that other than never setting foot on the university campus would have kept that from happening.

And the bat was because of Thomas. Niel had been pulled in because he was Roland's best friend, and if the bat was going to use Thomas's brother to reel him in, Niel would be pulled in.

So if he hadn't been friends with Roland, none of this would have happened.

If he'd been willing to sacrifice one of the best friendships, even before the bat inadvertently deepened it, he had. Today he would be safe, playing football and studying to become a history teacher, and probably enjoying the largest sandwich he could buy.

That's all it would have taken.

That was what a week left alone caused him. It had to be depression setting in.

If he could get out of the cell, he could fix this without sacrificing his past. He could tackle whatever guards were around, sneak among the dogs until he found the leader, beat him up, take the staff, and escape.

He'd steal one of the vans. There had to be one of those around. They couldn't all be back at the bottom of the trail.

What did the staff even do? What had Grant told him about how they were made? Nothing, that was what. Practitioners had them, the Chamber wanted them. How they came to be? Magic, as far as Niel knew.

Magic. If he knew more of it, none of this would have happened. He could have written phrases after phrases to keep him, Fedor, and Dario from being captured. He'd have known Isamu was a traitor and had had a phrase to stop his amazing reflexes for letting him win the fights.

If

If this, if that. If wishes were horsed and all that crap.

Maybe being stuck in here wasn't the worst thing that could have happened to him. After all, in here he was basically protected from whatever the Nazis were going to do out there, with that staff of unknown power.

It had to be powerful. Why else was it hidden all the way in here, behind not Practitioner magic, but keys only Survivor could unlock?

Okay, there had to be Practitioner magic involved. Niel didn't think archeologists and academics could build the devices they had to go through to get to the staff.

And basically hand it to the Nazis.

Fuck.

He needed to get out of here before he went insane.

Or was it already too late for that?

Maybe he was in a hospital bed, dying of sex starvation and this was all a dream because no one knew what was wrong with him. After all, what were the odds his father would know enough to recognize the symptoms? It wasn't like he had to live with this condition. Or the odds that he'd run into Fedor and Dario, the two other Survivors he knew about or knew at all? Olavo didn't count. He was Society, as far as Niel was concerned.

Fuck, wasn't there a trope about an adventure being all a dream? Which one was the better one for him? One had him on his death bed, the other had him becoming a sex doll for Nazis.

He chuckled. It wasn't like life could hand him easy choices, could it?

The ground shook, and he was on his feet. Did Switzerland get earthquakes? It shook again, and this time he made out the distant explosion. He relaxed. Not an earthquake.

Another explosion, closer, much closer. Then one further away. And another.

He smiled and wished he had a window. It sounded like the Nazis were under attack, and he wished he could see it. Hopefully, whoever they were would find him and they'd turn out to be friendlies.

It would be just his luck for the attackers to be Stalin Soldiers secretly waiting to use the staff to bring the dead Russian leader to life. And because his luck was that bad, in this scenario, Fedor would be a traitor, too.

Yeah, he needed out of here.

Especially since he had now devolved to imagining a two-inch tall naked rat slipping into his cell through the bars. It was too late for him. He was going to end up in a padded room babbling as he was used by the orderlies.

“Niel!” the figment of his imagination called, and while high pitch, the voice was familiar. Didn’t he know someone small?

“Roland?” he asked in disbelief.

Then the rat was full-sized again, and Niel took in his naked best friend. The cold air wasn’t kind to his junk, but that might be for the best. He might be tempted to have Roland fuck instead of finding out how he’d gotten here if that was full size. He opened his mouth, and it was covered as Roland kissed him.

His protest that they had more important things to do died in seconds, and he wrapped his arms around the rat, a hand on his ass and squeezing. Roland ground against him and whatever shrinkage the cold had caused was gone as the heat between them went up. Niel’s pants were getting tight in the crotch, but he didn’t think about readjusting himself.

Fuck, he’d missed kissing and holding a guy. That it was Roland just made it better.

“Fuck me,” Niel whispered in the second their mouth broke apart, panting. Before the rat replied, Niel was kissing him again, reaching between them to undo his pants. He could multitask.

Roland pushed away, chuckling. “Later, we can’t stay here.”

The cold air in his pants was enough of a shock Niel’s mind cleared and he hurried to put himself away. “What are you doing here?”

Roland rolled his eyes. “Rescuing you, duh.”

Niel stared at his best friend. “Naked?”

“I’m Society. What’s the point of wearing anything? And I can’t shrink clothing, so I end up naked, anyway. You’ve never had a problem with me being naked.”

“I’ve never had you naked while a prisoner of Nazis.”

“Neo-Nazis,” Roland corrected.

“Okay, but why you? I don’t really know how to say this politely, but exactly what are your qualifications as a rescuer?” There was another explosion further away again, then once more, that sounded too close for comfort. “Unless you can shrink me, I’m not sure how much of a rescue this is.”

Roland got down on all four and reached between the bar. He looked over his shoulder as he reached, winked at him, and raised his tail.

Niel was kind of peckish after a day without sex. He could probably—Roland was up, holding a key. “This was a bitch to carry over my shoulder for like a hundred miles.” He reached between the bars again and put the key in.

He still had his back to Niel, so he could still take advantage of—

The bars clanged back shut and Roland moved to the side, finger to his lips. Before Niel could ask, he heard the steps running. A doberman stopped by the door.

No, The doberman, grinned at him. “I’m not leaving without my future toy,” his kidnapper said. He frowned as he looked at the lock, but Roland was slamming the door in his face. Before the doberman regained his balance, the rat had a knee in his face, then an elbow in the throat, and the dog was on the ground, gasping for breath.

“What’s with the toy comment?” Roland asked as he pulled him into the cell.

“Seems all I’m good for is to be fucked, and as this is the guy who kidnapped me, sounds like he decided I was going to be his personal fuck slave.”

“He’s fucking lucky I don’t have the time to make him pay for it,” the rat said, pulling the pants off the doberman.

“If you’re planning on fucking him, it might not dislike it as much as he claims. He tried way too hard to play at being an aggressive top.”

Roland looked at the pants before putting them on. They were a little tight, highlighting his cock, but long. “No time for that. Not that he’s my type.”

“He’s a guy Rol, he is your type.”

Roland grinned at Niel, putting the boots on. “He kidnapped you. I don’t reward people for kidnapping my friends.”

“What’s with the clothes? Aren’t you going to lose them when you shrink again? By the way, I’m glad that wasn’t a permanent thing. As much fun as you were having while stuck at two-inch tall.”

“Me too, and I can still have that fun.”

“You’re weird.”

“Says the guy with the fetish for the ancient Roman history section of his university’s library.”

“It’s not a fetish. Everyone does it there.”

“But they aren’t all history nerds like you.”

“Getting dressed, Rol? What’s the point?” Niel wasn’t going to indulge him in this debate again.

“No plan to shrink with you tagging along. From this point forward, it’s about using the chaos to sneak around unnoticed and rejoin the others. Oh, you were asking about my qualifications. Those are the people I know.” He put on the shirt, then the jacket, and kicked the doberman in the stomach. “That’s for kidnapping Niel, asshole.” They left the cell and Roland closed it, breaking the key in the lock.

“Now you’re just being mean,” Niel said with a chuckle.

“If he didn’t want me to be mean to him, he shouldn’t have been a Neo-Nazi. I mean, come on, what does anyone siding with those losers expect?” He grabbed Niel’s hand and pulled him along.

The open area was the chaos Roland predicted, with fire burning. Then another explosion highlighted a form that seemed to vanish in the flames. Or just vanish, Niel realized as what he’d seen resolved itself into Roland’s brother.

He caught the flicker of an appearing rat again, fling something, then vanish. He had a bandoleer of balls over his chest. The explosion happened and Niel realized those were grenades. No wonder those were happening all over the place. The more light, the better Thomas saw and the more places he could teleport to.

“Here,” Roland said as a strong wind blew by them. Niel tried to figure out where it had come from, this deep inside the cavern. “Hold—” Roland said. Then Niel was elsewhere, his stomach still where ever he’d been before. He leaned against the rock wall and prepared himself for when it slammed back into him.

Thank god his stomach was always empty now.

The wind happened again, and this time Niel saw the hyena drop Roland off, then vanish in a burst of speed. Right, Chima.

“Nerve getting used to this,” Roland said, looking a little greenish.

“Petunias by the sun, Hertz,” someone said. “Chike, the wind’s behind you. Summer, what the fuck are you doing?”

A raccoon in a worn, dark brown leather jacket over a tan shirt and khakis looked over the chaos with way too large binoculars to his eyes. He pulled them away long enough to glance at Niel, then Jarod went back to looking over the battle and speaking in gibberish.

It was code, but Niel would not dignify the man with using code, not when he was dressed like that. Still, he had information they needed to know, and he was the man in communication with everyone else down there.

“The leader’s some wolf,” he said, and the old, young-looking raccoon didn’t react. Niel kept going. “He or someone near him will have a Practitioner staff that looks like a leg bone. I don’t know what it does, but it’s what they were after. They have a german shepherd named Wieland Stubber and a pallas cat called Fedor Shevet. Somewhere in these ruins should be Dario Cuevet. They need to be rescued.”

“Who’s the Suzuki?” Jarod asked.

“Isamu is with the Nazi, so he can go fuck himself. Or better yet, not be fucked for the next few weeks.”

Jarod nodded and began speaking that gibberish again, with the names slipped in. No thank you for the information, a well-done son. Not even warmth when he looked at him.

Niel bit his tongue and walked away to rejoin Roland, who was looking better. Now was not the time to give that man a piece of his mind. They were fucking blood. The least he could do was act like he gave a damn about it. His dad at least hadn’t let this development sour their relationship. Niel had been the one to do cause all of that.

He sat next to the rat and watched his biological father at work. From this position, he could see the holster and ancient revolver in it. Come on, that was going too far in imitating a movie—

“Oh, my fucking god.”

“What?” Roland asked, worried.

“He isn’t dressed as Indiana Jones. They fucking based the character on him.”

Jarod let out an annoyed sigh. “I should never have gotten drunk with that Spielberg fellow.” Then he went back to giving instructions.

Roland looked at Niel for more explanation, but he didn’t have them. Working out a series of movies, and a horrible series of remakes were based on his father didn’t tell him why the man was annoyed about it.

Chima appeared in a gust of wind, then fell to his knees.

Roland was beside him, checking him for injuries.

“Exhausted,” the hyena replied. “Just fuck me.” Then laid down.

Thomas appeared without even disturbing the dust at his feet and staggered until he leaned against the wall. “Hey Niel, glad you’re okay. Thanks for the info.”

“Did you find any of them?”

The rat shook his head. “As soon as the first grenades went off, they started moving out. Maybe a quarter got out before I could put enough explosions in their way to force the rest back.”

Bears and badgers in tactical armor joined them, along with others Niel figured were from different Society families. So maybe the amateur rescuers Niel had been afraid this was had proper

backup.

“No!” Jarod yelled. “That isn’t the plan, Summer. I don’t fucking care, that thing can’t cause widespread damage. Get your tail back here. I told you to—” he lowered the binoculars and looked into the distance in disbelief. The cursing went through a multitude of languages. Niel was impressed with the number Jarod had to be fluent in for them to flow so effortlessly. He could never curse in German because he was still at the stage he had to think about what he wanted to say.

“What happened?” Thomas asked, helping one of the badgers out of his clothes. Nearly all of them were in the process of undressing. Which meant, as far as Niel knew about the Society, that the bulk of this operation was done.

“That *friend* of yours,” Jarod said the word as if it was a curse, “just decided to go off on his own because he thinks he needs to get the staff back. I told him it doesn’t pose any immediate danger, but no, he thinks he knows more than I do about it and he’s going to go and get himself killed.” He looked at Thomas. “You need to teleport to his location and bring him back here.”

The rat shook his head. “I’m wiped. I doubt I could teleport to you and remain conscious, and I don’t know where he is. I explained to *you* how my power works. So don’t start acting like you know it better than I do.”

Jarod went back to cursing under his breath and looking over the cavern. Niel felt better for knowing Jarod wasn’t pissing off, only him.

Unfortunately, if they were shutting this down, it meant they weren’t going after those who had, and were still in the process of, escaping. Jarod was busy looking over the battlefield, giving instructions to the people still down there. Those here were getting busy with sex. No one was paying him any attention.

He moved cautiously to avoid being noticed until he was in the tunnel the badgers and bears had arrived from. Once they were out of sight, he ran for all he was worth. Maybe it was questionable if Wieland and Fedor were his friends, but they were victims of the same circumstances and he wasn’t leaving them to the Nazis’ less than tender mercies.

He made it outside without being stopped and located a fleet of abandoned trucks (I have no idea what those kinds of military trucks, with a tarp over them instead of a hard cube, that we always seen in movies) on the side. Fuck, he’d missed those who had escaped. Even if he drove away, how was he—

Motion out of the trees caught his attention. A pair of dogs were sneaking toward one of the trucks. Niel smiled his good fortune and move toward the truck they were edging toward. Once one of them opened the driver’s door, Niel ran for it. He grabbed onto the back and pulled himself in, grinning in victory, and he saw the kangaroo with his fist raised and a bundle of shiny things in his other hand.

Chapter Thirty

“Niel?” the kangaroo demanded. “What are you doing here?” the truck jerked into motion and Grant had to drop his arm to grab hold of a crate to keep from falling. “You need to get off.”

“You going to help?” Niel replied, grinning.

“I’ll happily throw you out.” Grant reached for him, but another bump had him be the one to nearly fall out. Niel grabbed him and pulled him in.

“I think we both need to be seated and inside the truck. Maybe you didn’t notice being teleported in, but we’re in the mountains and if this is anything like the path I had to walk to get up here, there’s going to be a deadly drop. With’s with the glitter pompom?”

The kangaroo looked at the things he held. “Principle of attracting attention. Being flashy. This was the truck I got in, so I had to make sure one of them pick it for their getaway.” He thought about something. “Might be why you got in, too. I didn’t have the time to be too selective in making it.”

“I got in this one because I saw the Nazis getting in.”

Grant put the bundle in his pocket. “Why are you here, Niel? This was about rescuing you. Roland’s going to worry.”

“He’s having sex. It’s going to be awhile until he notices I’m not there.”

“Why are you here, Niel?” the kangaroo repeated, this time putting an edge to his tone. Niel nearly dismissed it. Coach Horgar was why more threatening, but Grant had magic on his side. If he really wanted to, he could probably force him to leave.

“A similar reason to you, I’m guessing.”

“You need to make sure one of the most powerful staff ever created doesn’t remain in the hands of Neo-Nazi fanatics?”

“Jarod said it couldn’t do that much damage.”

“Oh sure, if you define damage by the physical destruction of property, the staff of Storger is basically harmless.”

Niel waited the kangaroo out.

(I don't think it's ever established how much Grant knows about the staff in the outline. Unless he knows the chamber has infiltrated the Nazis, I think he needs some form of knowledge to justify his actions. I'm not making what he knows precise. Just enough so he can fear what Nazis can do with it) "Storger was, according to legends, a shaman of a tribe hidden in the Himalayan mountains. Mostly canines. When they fell under attack by a rival tribe, she made a deal with a spirit and was granted a staff with the power to ensure they would always win against anyone rising against them."

"They don't exist anymore," Niel pointed out.

"Even magic has limits, but based on the stories I've been able to find, after that deal, they ruled this region undisputed. Enough, they were able to amass the workforce to make that city inside the mountain. The only other time it happened was Egypt and the pyramids."

"The Mayan," Niel said. "Probably Stonehenge too, although it's a smaller scale. The Romans were known for their workforce and pretty much all voluntary, until the decline. You have the Greeks—what? I'm into history. I'm just pointing out that you might be blowing what they did out of proportion. It's impressive, but not unheard of."

"Fine, it doesn't change the fact the staff made them into an unstoppable force until, probably, stronger magic got involved."

Niel nodded. "So that spirit, it's the universe?"

The kangaroo shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe she made the staff. More likely someone gave it to her, less likely, but still more than her making it is that she found it. This dates back to the eighth or ninth century. There aren't a lot of written records left, and about a remote place like this, even less. Legends and folklore are all I've had to go on."

"So what does the staff do to make an entire group unstoppable?"

"That, I don't know. They already looked pretty damned imposing, from those statues. The stories always say Storger made it happen. Her desire, her wishes, her need. But none go into specifics." Niel digested that in silence. "How about you tell me why you're in here when your best friend pretty much mobilized the Society to find and rescue you?"

Niel groaned, feeling horrible for running off now. "Please tell me you're exaggerating." He could see Roland ruffling a lot of furs to get his way. Determination had been a large part of what made him a force to be reckoned with on the football field.

"Only a little, but you're still not answering me."

"Three of the five of us are still unaccounted for, two of which I know for a fact the Nazis have prisoner. The people back there seem to have forgotten about them in their hurry to fuck."

"Cut them some slack, Niel. Anyone who had a power that could help us volunteered and used that power in the process of getting in there and you rescued. If they're having sex right now, it's about making sure they have the energy for what they're planning next, not celebrating."

"Speaking of energy," Niel said.

"You aren't powered the same way they are," Grant replied.

"Yeah, but it's been more than a day since the last time I've had sex. They kept us in separate cells. I'm getting 'hungry' and by the time this truck gets to its destination, I might be incapacitated."

Grant rested his head back. "Well, that isn't the worse way to kill a few hours."

* * * * *

Even a few hours was more than how long they were on the road, and out of boredom, Niel explored the truck's content. Beyond the crates closer to the back were boxes of clothing, canned goods, beddings, and enough gym equipment to fill at least one room.

It left him feeling like they'd taken the junk truck, and when he pointed that out to Grant, the kangaroo replied that the driver had picked the truck because he'd influenced the decision, not because of its contents. Niel hoped that was true because he wasn't sure how he'd explain to anyone asking how his rescue had failed because he'd ended up in a truck going to a different city.

The fact he was sure they weren't going back the way Niel had walked to reach the caverns only added to his worry.

His dad was going to get over their current uneasiness and ground Niel until he had his doctorate, or maybe even until he'd gotten tenure.

The truck started winding more down with the sun rising, and a few hours later they were on actual roads, instead of what had felt like trekking paths doing double duties as vehicle ways.

When they started seeing signs in the opposite direction, Niel couldn't read them.

"Italian," Grant said, musing.

Did Italy and Switzerland touch? Geography wasn't Niel's thing. They eventually left the main road again, then those roads in what felt to Niel like an attempt at avoiding driving through any of the towns he saw from the back. When they finally entered one, instead of Italian, the writing he saw was German. Had they driven back around and reached the outskirts of Germany?

Then the truck entered a warehouse and parked next to others.

"Do you understand German?" Niel whispered to Grant and got a shake of the head in return.

He listened to the conversation as the driver and passenger hurried to exit. "Something about to happen," he told the kangaroo. "They didn't say what, but they're determined not to miss it."

"It's got to be the staff," Grant replied. "After the defeat we handed them. They're going to want to use it to make themselves unbeatable." He looked outside.

"You think the others will be there too?"

"No idea, but I doubt they'll be far. They weren't expected to be attacked, so it isn't like they're going to have had a base to retreat to." He jumped out and Niel followed. They snuck around the other trucks, and when Niel glanced in them, he only saw what he thought were the remnants of an encampment.

Grant stopped him and indicated the two canines next to a truck. They were fidgety and the little Niel made out of their conversation revolved around the bad luck of drawing the short straw and missing the big event.

Grant gave a signal and ran at them. Niel followed and tackled the other one.

"English?" Grant asked once they were tied up.

The bloodhound spat in the kangaroo's face while the dachshund remained stoic. Niel went through their pockets while Grant tried again to get them to talk. The few words they said in German to him they understood English, as they were snide-mocking based on what Grant said, but it was nothing useful. They seemed to better than to assume neither of them understood German.

"Yes!" Niel exclaimed as he pulled a phone from the dachshund's pocket. "Double yes!" As the screen saver vanished with a swipe and no demand for a password. He brought up the messaging app and skimmed through them, looking for 'wichtig' or 'versammeln'. What else could have been used?

Treffen.

“Got it.” He reread the message, slower, ignoring the kangaroo’s inquisitive gaze and the glare the dachshund gave him. “Okay, they’re to meet at the Herstellung Schunemann. Are you sure we’re in Italy?” he asked as he brought up the mapping app and had it zoom on their location. Once he zoomed out to see the whole town, some buildings had names over them. The one he was looking for was one of them. “It’s taking place in a factory on the other side of town.”

“Good, let’s go.”

“Grant,” He called as the kangaroo hurried away, “we have a problem.”

“Which is?” he motioned for Niel to follow him.

Reluctantly, he did. “There’s no way you can get in there. If I put on one of their uniforms and stay in the shadows, I might be able to pass for a dog, but you? One look at your tail and we’re joining Wieland and Fedor wherever they’re being held.”

The kangaroo smiled. “Oh, no worry about that. I got what I needed from them so we’ll be able to walk in. But since you have a phone, do me a favor. There’s someone I need you to call.

Chapter Thirty-One

Niel fought not to gawk at the people ignoring him and Grant, as they walked across the town to the factory where the gathering was happening. He felt like he had a ‘look at me’ sign around his neck, being the lone raccoon walking in the open, not to mention the kangaroo next to him.

Only, there was no kangaroo next to him. Niel walked next to a bloodhound in the same gray and black uniform worn by every canine man who was part of the military side of this supposedly Italian town.

Niel himself wasn’t a raccoon, as far as any of the people seeing him were concerned. He was a dachshund, also in gray and black. Knowing that didn’t help feel like he didn’t stand out. Especially with how people were putting up posters with clear Nazi implications, even if the swastika was nowhere on them.

It all felt like a town, taken over by a movie studio and turned into a German version. Only the people Niel saw work had an eagerness to them he didn’t like. Even the women, who had acted subdued the previous times Niel interacted with some of them, looked eager for whatever was going on.

How long as these people lived here, and how was it no one had found out? He couldn’t think of a way this out-of-place community could keep from being made a show on the internet.

One tourist would be all it too. Either taking pictures or vanishing before he could. And this place would be the center of attention.

Niel glanced down to see his hand and confirm he still had his gray-brown fur after catching the russet reflection in a store window. Only looking directly at himself, did Niel see himself. Any other way, and he saw what everyone else did. What Grant wanted them to, via the fur embroidered in the jacket he wore.

Niel didn’t get how Grant’s magic worked, despite the kangaroo explaining as he worked quickly. Something about the aspects of sympathy and expectations, and blending in. Niel preferred Society magic. It was a language with syntax and grammar. Grant’s form felt more like... well, magic.

Someone yelled, and Niel nearly jumped out of his fur. Another responded happily and quick German ensued as they moved in the same direction as him and Grant. They were now a crowd hurrying toward the factory. Niel had trouble not getting bumped into. And staying by the kangaroo-bloodhound. The building came into view and looked like any other factory, except for the banner at the entrance, a reproduction of the wolf's head from the cavern, and announcing the great day had arrived.

And the swastikas on either side.

It seemed that here was where these people no longer had problems announcing exactly what they were.

The entrance was large, but not so much Niel avoided being pushed and shoved, and not having any choice in where he went once inside.

So much for exploring while everyone was busy with whatever this was. Before he knew it, he was standing in a large space with the others, but without the bloodhound next to him. He discreetly looked around, until he noticed the way others were looking, waving to friends, calling to them. He looked around, searched for the bloodhound. What did he even look like? He hated to admit that, but in this crowd of dogs, could he even tell one bloodhound from another?

Should he make his way out of the room? Had Grant managed to not be pulled in here and was he looking for Niel, or off looking for the staff? Could Niel even move from where he was, considering how packed the crowd was?

His thoughts were distracted by the hush that fell over the space. Niel looked where everyone was watching and people entered. They had to be on an elevated platform for Niel to see them from this far. And he fought the urge to crouch as the wolf who had come to his cell with Isamu stopped in the center and looked the assembled canines over. On his left and right were seven canines in clear military uniform. There was no mistaking the Nazi design to those. No mere hinting at the heritage there.

"Today is the day we have all waited for," the wolf began, in German. "You have come the world because you are the correct ones and you will be made right."

This was going to be a problem, Niel realized. His German was nowhere near good enough to understand what this guy was saying. Not that he cared, but knowing what this was about could help find the staff for Grant; when he found him again.

"Today is the day we have all waited for," someone else said, in English, slightly accented with German. "You have come from all over the worlds because you are among those chosen to be improved, to be brought closer to perfection."

Niel stopped listening only long enough to notice the other languages this was being translated into by some unseen group at the front, then focused entirely on the English.

"—chosen ones. Those of you who will be at the forefront of showing the world who its rightful rulers are."

No one cheered, but there was an eagerness in the air Niel didn't like. What else could they be waiting for after that announcement?

The leader raised a wrapped bundle in the air, and now the crowd cheered.

It was no longer in the shirt, but the leather wrapping didn't hide the shape, and then the leader carefully undid the buckles before offering the staff to the wolfhound on his left.

"General Kroeger," the English speaker announced after the leader gave a short speech, "has been chosen as the wielder due to his dedication to strengthening us. He demonstrated that he is worthy

of its gift.”

Once the translators were done, the wolfhound took it and as he raised the staff in a salute to the crown, his body changed. He grew taller, larger, more muscular. Niel thought it was some special effect to impress the crowd, but the man’s uniform grew visibly tight even from where he stood, then it ripped at the seams and fluffy fur was exposed.

Niel swallowed. Other than the ripped uniform, the man now bore an eerie similarity to the statues in the catacombs. The... Niel had no idea what species he should use now, raised his head, and howled. The sound made a shiver run down Niel’s back. It was the call of a predator from ancient times, one calling its pack for the hunt and—

The crowd responded, and the spell was broken.

Dear God, didn’t one of them know how to howl? Niel thought he could do better. And found he had to when his neighbor glanced at him.

Okay, maybe he couldn’t. At least he didn’t stand out.

Once the crowd quieted, the general faced the leader again, and Niel thought he was offering the staff back, but instead, rested it on the wolf’s shoulder; Like a knighting gesture.

The changes weren’t as pronounced, but still visible. The fur on the man’s head became longer, denser-looking. The uniform was tighter. The crowd exploded in joyful howls on its own this time and continued as the general knighted more of the men on the platform. Some changes were minor, because, like the leader, they were already close to being full wolves, but in others, the change was drastic. Like the thin poodle who, upon being knighted, exploded out of his uniform into a majestic, and hung, a creature that would make any who see him drool or run off in terror.

Niel wasn’t entirely certain which one he’d pick.

Once the men on the platform were all wolves who could terrify with a look, the leader spoke and the translation came, trembling with excitement.

“Today is the day of the Reich! Under our rule, the world will become one pack. One true pack of purity. And you will guide it. I call now the first of the noble warriors one instrumental in retrieving our lost glory. Isamu Suzuki.

The kishu stepped up onto the platform back straight, looking like he was holding himself back from running. Niel wanted to run there and beat the traitor to a pulp, and as the crowd surge forward, he thought he’d get his chance, but someone caught his hand and pulled him back.

Niel rounded, ready to punch who had found him out, but the bloodhound raised an eyebrow. “You one of them now?” he whispered.

Niel lowered his arm and mouthed, ‘Grant?’

The bloodhound nodded and pulled on Niel again. The crowd was so focused on what was happening in the front no one paid them attention.

“That wasn’t what I was expecting,” Grant said once they were away from the Nazis.

“Is it actually changing them?”

“Seems like it.” Grant looked thoughtful.

“Seems?”

“Niel, I don’t have all the answers. I already told you all I have to go by for that staff are legends. I thought it might be something to mind control people, inspire them to do what you want.” He paused and frowned, then continued. “But it never occurred to me that the stories meant actually

changing people.”

“I didn’t think that could be done. I mean, changing people.”

“It takes a lot of power to do it. Especially on a full body and permanent scale. But staves are extremely powerful. Now I know why Jarod and his bunch hid it. But he still has a screwed-up sense of what destruction means if he doesn’t think this qualifies. Fuck, if it can change other species into those wolves, we’re looking at the extinction of more civilization than any other times in recorded history.”

“Then we need to get to it, right?”

“The problem is how.”

“It’s not like anyone knows we don’t fit in, we go in, act like we’re going to get knighted, then take the staff from them.”

“That’s... not as easy as you think. That guy, the general, he’s a Practitioner now. No time to explain. But there’s a good chance that even without training, he’s going to be able to tell there’s something off about us. Normally I’d say they don’t know what they’re talking about, but I don’t think these guys are going to bother listening to me if one of their precious chosen ones tells them to grab us. There’s only so much manhandling these talismans can handle before they’ll break. Damn it, I need a way to get to him before it’s too late.”

Niel looked away as the bloodhound cursed. Someone had attracted his attention. The man was further in the corridor and doing what he could not to attract any attention as he mopped the floor. But he was the only other person around, so Niel had no choice but to notice him, as well as one other thing about him.

“Grant, you said need a way to move around freely, right?”

“I just said that,” the bloodhound snapped. “But right now, any canine in here is going to be brought to that man for transformation. That’s not going to help.”

“What if you weren’t a canine?” Niel asked.

“Then I wouldn’t be here. They only let those in here, remember?”

“Do they?” Niel pointed to the janitor. “It looks like there are some jobs canines are too good for.”

The house cat looked up from his work, fear on his face, and Niel hurried to drop his hand. He’d never been made so aware that pointing was rude as that.

“That’s... not ideal,” Grant said thoughtfully. “But this might work to both our advantages.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that now you don’t need any disguises, so we don’t have to remain together. You can go look for your friends, while I come up with a way to get close to that new Practitioner and get the staff from them.”

Niel looked at Grant and was about to ask what he meant when it sunk in.

“Well, I guess if I can’t cut it as a history teacher, now I’ll have experience as a janitor to fall back on.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Niel did his best not to pull at the coveralls he wore or move too quickly as he pushed the wheeled bucket around using the mop handle. Finding coveralls he could even fit into had been surprising enough, with the other janitors they'd located looking more like the house cat, health-wise than Niel. He could guess what the Neo-Nazis had done to the healthier part of the non-canine population when they'd moved in, but didn't want to think about it.

He'd asked Grant why he didn't use magic to make it fit, and the kangaroo had told him he needed to remain close for it to be powered. That had caused a minor freakout on the raccoon's part at what might have happened when the two were separated, but Grant reassured him that while Niel might have lost track of him, he had never been far from the raccoon.

Grant had used magic to both make himself look like the house cat, after getting him to lead them to the supplies and uniform for Niel, and then making him sleep so there were no chances he'd go running to his overlords, or have one of them notice there were two of them walking around. Then, Grant had headed to find the main offices, figuring that was where the leadership would eventually go to, once they were done in the impromptu auditorium, and Niel headed to find... well, where ever a prisoner could be held.

The factory had a lot of concrete walls, so just about any room could hold someone. He didn't see anything resembling the large vents movies like to imply were in any place converted to hold prisoners. The one thing he figured on was that it wouldn't be a room with an outside wall. No matter how thick those were, they'd be the least secure ones.

He kept his head down and shoulders hunched as men hurried by. Not one of them glanced at him since anyone not of lupine descent was beneath their notice, but it only took one to be more attentive, one clever guy among what Niel felt was a sea of amateur, and he'd be found out, and if he was lucky, he'd discover where the prison was, by being thrown into it.

It was much like when his team played against a weaker one. Coach Horgar was always on

them not to let a series of losses make them think the opposition couldn't come up with clever plays and steal a victory from a team that got overconfident.

So Niel acted as if most of the Nazis hurrying by were clever and, because, with the atmosphere of victory they emanated, Niel wasn't confident the prison was where he'd end up if caught.

Niel put the mop back into the bucket once the group was out of sight and moved to the next door, opening it, looking in to confirm it was empty, then making sure no one was in the hall to see him not do the job they expected a janitor would do and close the door and move on to the next.

The worry that Wieland and Fedor weren't even in this building crossed his mind, and he ignored it. He couldn't let fear paralyze him. If he confirmed they weren't here, then he'd work on figuring out where else they might be. If he was lucky, Grant would have retrieved the staff, called in the cavalry and Wieland would be enjoying a celebratory fuck by the time Niel reached him.

Steps sounded, and Niel pulled the mop from the bucket, sloshing the dirty water on the floor.

"Reiniger!" a man called and Niel hoped the answer would come quickly because how long could someone watch him, even if only out of their peripheral vision before they noticed he was cleaning the same spot over and over? Maybe he should move, but he was scared that attracting the attention of any Nazi would lead to the raccoon being revealed, and then he'd probably be tortured just so they could laugh.

The call came again, annoyed this time, and when no one answered, the steps resumed, and were approaching. Of course, whoever this guy was after was somewhere behind Niel. Maybe he'd pass quickly and be—

The hand pulled him to face the German shepherd before it registered they were next to Niel, and the dog let out a string of German too fast for Niel to make out. He stared at that angry face, trying to get his mind to get into gear.

"Come on," the German shepherd said in disgusted English with a Louisiana accent. "I thought all of you bastard had been taught German."

"Know English," Niel squeaked and startled himself.

"There's that at least." The dog leaned into Niel's face and spoke slow and loud. "Go clean the mess in the office."

Niel nodded eagerly, and the dog left in the opposite direction he'd come from. Hands shaking, he put the mop back in the bucket and headed for where he'd been instructed. That had been too close. What if he'd started speaking Italian? About the only Italian word he knew was pizza.

And worry about not finding the office vanished when he saw the open door after turning the indicated corner. Approaching, laughter exploded, then German. Reluctantly, he poked his head into the room.

Five wolves sat around a table with bottles of wine and filled glasses. Niel stared as one took a leg bone and put it over a shoulder as if he was resting a sword there. Hadn't the general had larger shoulders? Niel wondered. But then again, he'd been in the audience, far from the man as he transformed. Maybe it had been an effect of the change. He'd seemed larger than he really was.

One of the wolves noticed him in the door and barked something in Italian, motioning for a shattered glass on the floor among spilled wine. No need for a translator on that one.

"Didn't last long," was all Niel made out from what one of the wolves told the others, in German. "You longer?" He wished they'd slow down so he could work out when they said better.

“Stronger,” among a lot of other stuff, the one holding the staff said. More German. “Not go.” Subtitles. That was what Niel needed. He could read that fast.

“Still good. Make stronger ones.”

Niel slowly mopped the floor, watching them. He was sure they’d each undergone the change, and seeing them up close, he could tell there weren’t identical, which had been what it seemed like at a distance. One’s fur had more russet to it, while another had a silver sheen, and another was darker.

He counted one glass for each of them, so whose glass was shattered on the floor? The one german shepherd’s? Niel had trouble imagining that one in the company of these wolves. Maybe it was that he’d been American, and these were clearly German.

The conversation didn’t stop, but Niel could put little together that was useful. Something about more of them would make something stronger. Their army?

“Hausmeister,” one called, and Niel recognized that word. Janitor. He looked up, and the wolf said something in rapid... Italian? It certainly wasn’t German.

“I know German,” Niel said, aiming for proud meekness. One thing history taught was that oppressors enjoyed being looked up to by their victims.

The one with the staff laughed and said something Niel thought was about the mongrel who thought he was worth the tongue. He didn’t hide his confusion.

“Get those to the cleaner,” the one who’d called him said and pointed to a set of folded clothes on a counter. The boots were next to them.

He nodded and hurried to finish cleaning the floor. Why one of them had brought a full uniform, including the boots here, Niel didn’t know, but they’d given him an excuse to get out of here and back to his search.

Another wolf looked into the room, then gave a salute. “Leutnant Kieseletter, more are ready.”

The wolf with the staff drained his glass, then stood. He tapped a bottle. “Keep for me.” Then he followed the wolf away.

The four left burst out in laughter and immediately emptied the bottle in their glasses, then raised it to the honor of the late leutnant Kieseletter. Niel grabbed the uniform and hurried out. Did the duty of changing the other canines into wolves come with some sort of ceremonial sacrifice he’d missed because Grant had pulled him out?

And what was he supposed to do with the uniform? He didn’t remember seeing a place that cleaned clothing in the rooms he’d looked into. Was he expected to take this to the local laundry shop? Or worse, for him to clean them himself? If he dumped this in the trash, would anyone notice? Could he use it as an excuse to wander around the building? Use his broken German to explain he was looking for the laundry?

It would be a hell of a lot faster than having to push that bucket and wash a floor anytime a group of people walked by him.

* * * * *

Maybe he didn’t even need the set of clothes, Niel decided after another group of Nazis, these mostly wolves with muscular build of one transformed, walked by him without even glancing in his direction. Maybe now that they were their version of perfect, anyone not a canine just didn’t exist for them.

With them gone, he opened the door and looked into yet another empty office. Maybe it was

time for him to admit defeat and just ask one of the wolves to take him to the prison. Then he could use some clever... whatever to overpower the near-perfect specimen of sentient predators and rescue Wieland and Fedor.

He opened yet another door to what would be an empty office and found himself staring at a house cat with a phone to his ear, staring back at him. Before Niel could slam the door and think about where to run, the cat said. "Shila, give me a second," to the person on the other end.

The voice was Grant's.

Shila was a name Niel knew. Grant had him call her before they'd taken in the disguises of Nazis, and she'd called him, all the way back at the farm.

"Get in here and close the door, Niel," Grant hissed. "Yes, he's here. Of course, he's fine. Shila, I said I'd call you every hour, that's what I'm doing. If I, or Niel, miss the next one, you have my permission to tell the others where we are."

Niel didn't hear the words, as Grant pulled the phone for his ear, but the tone came in loudly. Whoever this Shila was, she didn't need his permission to do one damn thing.

"Oh don't give me that," he snapped at her, phone back to his ear. "This is nothing like that. They were Chamber, the staves didn't belong to them. This guy, that he asked for it or not, that he knows it or not, is one of us. Of course, him being a Neo-Nazi matters, but Fuck, Shila, what are the others going to think if I start breaking Practitioner's staves?"

"Grant?" Niel called and the house cat-looking Kangaroo raised a finger to stop him.

"Oh, really? No one will know? Like you won't hold this over me." The cat ran a hand over his face. "I'm sorry. You're right, you wouldn't do that to me. But this is the kind of thing that's going to come back to bite me in the tail, Shila, I can't just—"

"He doesn't have the staff anymore."

Grant stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"The guy on the stage isn't who has the staff anymore. It's some other wolf, a lieutenant one thing or another."

Grant shook his head. "You didn't hear right. A staff doesn't just get passed from one person to another. He won't understand why, but he isn't going to let someone else take his staff. It takes a while until we build enough of a connection and trust so we can make the effort to let someone else handle it."

"I saw him. He had it, and they were drinking wine. Then he was called out to make more transformation, and they toasted him as if he was about to die."

Shila said something that made Grant break the stare.

"I don't know," he finally said. "Anytime I find someone with a new staff, the first thing I tell them is to not push themselves." He listened. "Yeah, I think you're right. Even brand new, without training, he'd know what he was doing, what was about to happen. He'd have to make a conscious decision to push himself into apotheosis. I can see him doing it because of his belief. He wouldn't be the first, but for the Nazis to just take it and hand it to someone else? Who knows how many they're going to go through before they're done with the changes?"

Grant leaned against the wall. "You're right. This puts them on par with the Chamber, which means that anyone who picks up the staff after that basically forces himself onto it. Okay. Tell me where he is and I'll find a way to reach him so I can break it."

"How would she know where the staff is?"

Grant pulled the phone from his ear and put it on speaker. “Because,” the woman said, “these assholes do love to know what’s going on in their town. There are cameras everywhere. I’m watching more of those assholes making more wolves as we’re wasting time talking.”

“Can you tell me where Wieland is?”

“No idea who that is.”

“German shepherd, drugged, probably held in a cell.”

“Oh kid, if I’d known that was who you were looking for, I could have told you where he was before you got into this building.”

#

(so, this raises one question to me. Grant has a phone. Niel took a phone off one fo the guards back in the warehouse. Why doesn’t he have it anymore?)

Chapter Thirty-Three

Niel had to retrieve his mop and bucket before he could follow Shila's direction to where Wieland and Fedor were held. He wished the phone he'd taken off the guard had come with an earpiece so he could be in contact with her as he moved, knowing someone was coming would be good, instead of having to either quickly start watching a corner of the floor or risk being called out for not doing his job and continuing to push his bucket ever forward.

At least the factory was large, and most of the Nazis were still in the large room, undergoing or waiting to undergo the change. Those he encountered were either hurrying or had been changed and headed somewhere to relax.

Once she told him where they were, Niel was embarrassed he hadn't considered that first. Of course, a basement made perfect sense to hold prisoners. Even someone as strong as Wieland couldn't punch his way out through the ground, so he'd have to come up and be intercepted. He comforted himself with the knowledge he'd have found it, eventually, but that was why being about to communicate with Shila would be nice.

He didn't think the Nazis would look kindly on their janitor being on the phone with someone, especially not if he spoke English.

A sheepdog in the Nazi uniform looked out of a doorway as Niel approached. He'd given up on sneaking close to anyone the instant he'd started pushing that mop bucket. The wheels had been designed to announce his arrival three towns over. He kept his head down and readied something resembling an explanation in broken German if he was stopped.

The guard said something insulting about Niel to someone inside the room, but moved out of the way as he approached.

Niel didn't know what the long room had been used for before being converted into cells, but the walls were concrete, just like the floor and ceiling. The doors were metal bars and looked to have been there a while.

Even before he started mopping the floor and had that as an excuse to look in the cells, Niel knew his job had been complicated beyond anything he could imagine. There were a lot of voices whimpering in Italian in those cells.

Niel had expected to free Wieland and Fedor, then somehow make it out of the factory. Wieland's strength would be a large part of that succeeding and getting lost in the countryside while waiting for someone to nuke this place. Nazis deserved nothing less. Then, and only then, would he call for a rescue.

Being able to live off sex had its advantage.

But he couldn't feed a bunch of other people that way.

It would have been really nice of Shila to tell him that little detail.

Glancing into the two first cells, as he 'cleaned' the floor, showed him only canines, and men. This would be why the town seemed to have so many women in it, and it could account for the apparent joy and compliance. If the men here were the women's husbands, sons, or relatives, they would be on their best behaviors. They all looked borderline undernourished.

He didn't doubt every cell would be the same. A dozen doors, there were what twenty packed in the cells? How was he getting around two hundred and fifty people out of here? Because as pragmatic as he tried to be, Niel couldn't see himself being able to stand the thought of leaving them behind.

Now he wished Grant had told Shila to call in the cavalry already.

The other guard, a chihuahua, shuffled a deck of cards and they started playing or continued. Niel was surprised to see them playing cards instead of on their phone. This was too much like any of the historical war drama for his liking since the intrepid rescuer in those always ended up getting caught.

Niel found Wieland chained at the back of a cell, by himself, and he looked unconscious, as a wolf entered the hall with the cells and instructed the two guards to report upstairs for their blessings. There was a discussion, which as far as Niel could make out, centered on the schedule being changed because of intruders, and that he'd watch over the riffraff until they were back.

Niel wasn't sure, but it sounded like they were using the staff and turning everyone into wolves as a way to flush out Grant and him. Which was clever.

The wolf didn't even glance in his direction as he came to stand before Wieland's. When he spoke, the tone dripped with derision. Something about Wieland no longer being the big one.

"What are you talking about, Isamu?" Wieland replied in English.

"English?" the wolf replied.

Isamu? Niel thought, and why was Wieland talking in English?

"You aren't worthy of the proper tongue," the German shepherd replied. Where had that superior attitude come from?

Niel glanced at Wieland, who caught his eyes and gave a small smile.

"Worthy?" the wolf snapped? "Look at me. I have been chosen, made perfect. I'm done being the small one, the butt of every bully's joke. Now you're going to be my play thing."

"You think looking like that means anything? I know people smaller than you were who stood up to those taller than you are. Whatever your problem was, being big and appearing tough isn't going to change it."

"No!" Isamu slammed a hand against the bar. "People like you don't get to tell me what to do,

what I am anymore. I am part of the superior species now, not you. You're going to do what I tell you. The world will be at our feet, licking our boots so we'll give them our crumbs, or in your case, my cock."

Wieland snorted, and the derision was heavy. "Like I'm worthy of whatever's in there."

"No, you're dirt, but your kind of people forced themselves on me for long enough. It's time you found out what it's like."

"What are you talking about, Isamu?" Wieland asked, sounding tired now.

"You think that just because I need sex to live, I liked being used by anyone bigger than me?" the wolf unlocked the bars. "I'm going to show you what it's like to be fucked when you don't want it."

"I didn't treat you like that, Isamu," Wieland protested. "Fuck, I only met you a few days ago at this point, and you seemed pretty eager anytime we fucked."

"Because you'd have let me saying: no, stop, please, stop you? You and that raccoon? Big men, pushing everyone smaller into doing what you want? Using everyone who can't measure up to you. Well, that's done now. I'm going to do the using, you, then, when the coon's caught, him too. You're both going to be my toys, and I am going to enjoy putting you through everything I was put through." He pulled the door open.

"Isamu!" Niel yelled, rushing the wolf.

Isamu sidestepped, but the move was clumsy, and Niel zagged with him, planting a shoulder in his chest and shoving him away from the door. The wolf didn't stagger as long as Niel had hoped, but the simple fact he'd caught him was plenty to rejoice on. He'd seen the Kishu fight, and it had been quick, precise, and definitely in his favor.

The wolf put a hand on the table to steady himself and the snarl turned into a smile as he lifted it, holding two playing cards. Niel wondered what Isamu expected to accomplish with those, then remembered watching a show online about card throwers, and that the ex-kishu's family power was precision. What would happen if one of those hit Niel?

The wolf moved faster than he saw and Niel readied himself to push through the coming pain, but the card didn't hit him. It careened randomly, as if thrown by someone who had no idea what they were doing.

Niel got over the surprise first and rushed the wolf. Maybe the change had taken away his power. The wolf flicked the other card and Niel felt the deep cut to his arm. The triumph on Isamu's face didn't last as they collided, Niel lifting the larger wolf until they hit the wall, then backpedaling as Isamu shoved him away.

Well, the muscles weren't only for show.

The wolf stepped forward and swung quickly, and missed each time, even if Niel had trouble tracking the movements. He wasn't a fighter, he was a football player. The way Isamu looked at his hands while Niel worked things out gave him the answer, and the cut on his arm told him he didn't have much time to end this.

He rushed again, and this time the wolf crouched in preparation to receive him. The move was almost perfect and if a direct impact had been Niel's plan, it would have failed outright. Instead, he zigged at the last moment, a classic move to avoid an incoming intercept. Isamu moved with him, and it would have worked, as the wolf reached to grab the raccoon, except for one thing.

Isamu tripped on his own foot.

Niel stopped, turned, and, before the wolf could regain his balance, grabbed his head and brought it down hard on his rising knee.

Isamu fell to the side and didn't move, except to breathe.

Niel wanted to celebrate brains winning over brawn, with a good dose of brawn added to the mix, but if the wolf woke up now, Niel was fucked in all the ways he could imagine and a few more, he expected. That had been his one surprise move, and there was no way he could pull it off a second time.

He hurried to take Isamu's jacket off, then the shirt, which he ripped into strips and used to tie the wolf's hand behind his back. Boy Scout knot tying badge and action movie watching made him turn his arms into something that would make a mummy envious, and hopefully would keep him from ripping them off if he woke up before Niel had everyone out of here.

He ran into Wieland's cell and the german shepherd couldn't hide his surprise. "How did you win? It is impossible to best a Suzuki in anything physical."

"He wasn't used to his new body. It threw off his first attempts. And I've had to take down guys bigger than me on the field before." Wieland looked at him in confusion while Niel searched for a way to undo the manacle. "I did mention I play football in college, right? I might be big for a raccoon, but on the field, I'm still among the smaller players, and our coach isn't kind to anyone he doesn't see do everything they can to win. It makes for a very competitive atmosphere. Damn it! Those things are bolted shut."

"I will not be able to break them before someone comes to check on the prisoners."

"Didn't Fedor know a healing phrase?" Niel headed for the cell's door.

"No. Isamu and I are the only ones who know one."

"Fuck! Why wasn't that what Olavo taught me?"

"I will show you."

Niel stared at the german shepherd. "Isn't that like really dangerous?"

"I will show you simply healing sigil." He nodded to the dirty floor. "I will describe it, and you draw."

The next five minutes were spent tracing a symbol over and over until Wieland was satisfied. Then Niel jerked off and after the german shepherd nodded again, used the cum to trace the symbol on his chest.

"Well?" Niel asked.

"It is a simple healing. It is not so fast." He tensed, and his chains whined. He stopped and panted.

"Should I do it again?"

"More will not help. Go look for Fedor. I will break the chains."

Niel nodded and stepped out, wiping his hands clean on his coveralls. Three cells over, he found the pallas cat and did his best not to smile. "Do you want me to come back later?"

"Funny," Fedor replied. There weren't many men in his cell, only seven, but they were mid-teens at best and they had latched onto the pallas cat for comfort. Some seemed to have fallen asleep in the thick fur, but not one of them looked to be in a hurry to let him go.

"I'm going to have to look for the keys," Niel said, but before he stepped away from the door, metal snapped apart in Wieland's cells. "Or we use the all-purpose door breaker."

The German shepherd stepped to the door of his cell, leaning on the wall for support and chains trailing on the floor.

“Fedor’s in this cell, I need you to break the door.”

“I will need more help first. I need more healing.”

“I thought you said more healing sigils wouldn’t help.”

Wieland let himself slide to the floor before Niel reached him.

“I know the healing phrase. But I need cum to write it.”

Neal jerked off again, and Wieland quickly wrote on his fur. Then he snapped the chains off the manacles and stood. He had every door off the walls and the prisoners started milling out.

“Now what?” Wieland asked. “They aren’t letting anyone who isn’t a pure breed wolf out of the building.”

“Got that covered.” Niel pulled the phone out of a pocket and flipped it to the list of outgoing calls. It was empty. He cursed. “I lost her number. This is the phone I used to call her before, but the list of call’s gone.”

“You really think I was going to leave my number on some stranger’s phone?” Shila replied before Niel started cursing his bad luck again. “What if you’d lost the phone in this so impressive rescue?”

“Okay, good.” Niel wasn’t addressing the tone she’d said that in. He wasn’t a professional rescuer, and if she could get them out of here, she could mock him all she wanted. “Tell me you have a way to get over to two hundred canines who aren’t wolves past a bunch of Nazis looking for anyone who isn’t a wolf-like them.”

“You don’t ask for much, do you?”

“Hey, you knew I’d be finding all these people here when you told me where Wieland was and never mentioned it. Did you think I was going to abandon them here?”

“No, I didn’t. In fact, I didn’t mention them because I knew you’d make that decision, while you might hesitate to go on the search if you knew there were more than two people involved.”

“I wouldn’t—never mind. Do you have a plan?”

She sighed, and Niel worried.

“I do. The only problem is that I need you to go rescue him.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

#

“I stay,” Fedor said, looking beaten.

“Fedor, you don’t need to protect them,” Niel said, “and we can use your help.”

“Niet.”

Niel opened his mouth to try again, but the pallas cat’s expression stopped him.

Shila had explained she’d seen Grant captured, and that once they rescued him, he’d be able to use his magic to hide everyone as they escaped. Niel had expressed doubts, but Grant was a master at not getting caught and all the relating concepts. He didn’t point out the kangaroo needed a rescue.

There had been talk with the prisoners, and they’d agreed to wait here until their return.

Now it looked like they’d get an extra protector.

“Feel too much already,” Fedor said. “More pain out there.” His shoulders slumped. “Not brave.”

“It’s okay. We’ll be back as quickly as we can. Then we can get out of here and all go back to our lives. I can’t wait to be back in Minneapolis and at school.”

“Da,” the pallas cat said, but didn’t sound convinced.

Niel joined Wieland by the door. The german shepherd now wore a Nazi uniform and wasn’t happy about it. It was loose since it had been worn by the wolf that was Isamu first, but it would take someone paying attention to notice. Isamu was still unconscious, in Wieland’s old cell, which was the

only one with a door still attached to it.

Niel was still in his janitor's uniform and worried about how they were going to pull off the stunt Shila was working on.

"Okay, the program's ready to run on your phone and your friend," she said in his ear. Isamu had a phone with an earpiece on him, and Shila had taken it over before Niel even knew it was there. She'd instructed him to take it and give his old one to Wieland.

"Why does Wieland have to wear the uniform if you're going to magic one on me?" Niel asked.

She sighed. "Niel, I'm not Grant. I don't get obfuscation the way he does, okay? So making you look like one of the Nazis I think I can manage, but pulling that off on two people, at the same time, while watching everything else that's going on? He's already a dog, so why should I add that headache to the already building migraine?"

"Alright, alright." He wanted to argue that a program was a program, but he'd decided that what she called a program was anything but. She was part of the same faction as Grant, even if she seemed to be doing her magic in a completely different way. After all, she was going to cast an illusion over him while not being anywhere near, and Grant said he couldn't do that.

And unlike Grant, he could see the changes as his clothing turned into a mirror of the uniform Wieland wore.

"You're ugly for a wolf," the German shepherd said.

"That's because I'm a raccoon. Ready?"

"This is not our duty," Wieland stated.

"You can stay here with Fedor."

"So can you."

"We need Grant to get these people out. I'm getting him."

"Then I am going with you."

Niel nodded and stepped out and walked with far more confidence than he felt.

"Now," Shila said, after instructing him on where to turn. "You need to remember that I have no idea if Grant succeeded in breaking the staff."

"Shouldn't you have seen it?" Niel muttered.

"If it had happened in view of a camera, yeah, but all she saw was his form being carried to a room. He hasn't left it yet, so he's still in there."

"Maybe he's dead."

"He was breathing when he was brought in."

Shit, he'd said that aloud. But at least she confirmed he was okay; going in.

"So what I can tell you is that I haven't seen anyone with the staff since I saw Grant and that nothing being said confirms it one way or another. Whatever the room they brought it used to be for, it doesn't have any TVs, no radios or computer, and the people who might be in it don't have phones or even a smart watch."

"Almost as if they know those can be hacked," Niel whispered, then closed his mouth as they walked by a group of Nazis. They didn't glance at Niel or Wieland, so he didn't glance at them.

"This is the twenty-first century," she replied. "So being hacked is common knowledge. That they made sure to not have anything in there tells me they have more reasons than most to be careful."

“You mean like what if they were Nazis hiding in an Italian city?”

“Can the sarcasm,” she replied.

The door in question was ahead, and the corridor was empty. Niel glanced at Wieland and the german shepherd nodded. They were still doing this.

He really hoped the staff guy wasn't there, since that was the one person Grant had warned him might be able to see through a magical disguise.

Letting out a breath, he opened the door and stepped into the room, taking in as much of it as he could before all hell broke loose.

On a flimsy table in the center of the room was a sheet with shattered bones on it. Three wolves in uniform were turning to look at them while a... what the fuck was the guy holding grant against the wall by the neck? Lupine, definitely. But he had to be over seven feet tall and massed... well with those muscles, and the size of that cock and balls, he had to be well over four hundred pounds. Was that who had held the staff before? If the general and lieutenant had been turned into a near-perfect specimen, and this one was just about godly, what had he been before?

“Why are you interrupting us?” one of the wolves demanded, and Niel was pulled from looking at God Wolf glaring at Grant at the realization he'd understood the speaker.

“Apologies, sir,” Wieland said in German, with a translation in the german shepherd's voice coming over that through the earpiece a fraction of a second later. “We have important news. We were instructed to come at one and tell you.”

The news was genuine, so there was no worry a check would find them out. Shila had intercepted it and misdirected the messenger. Now, the only way someone would know he and Wieland weren't the true messengers was for one of them to walk out and somehow find them. Not impossible, but at this point, Niel couldn't argue with the plays being made. They were the best they had and had to hope the field would be to their advantage.

“Well,” the wolf demanded. “What is that news?”

The one to his left was staring at Wieland as if he was trying to work out who he could be.

“We were told to deliver the message to the esteemed leader.”

“Then move out of the way,” someone ordered from behind Niel and Wieland, and the shepherd jumped, while Niel barely contained the reflex, stepping to the side.

The leader, which Niel could only guess was the leader because of what he'd said, he looked like a more perfect version of the wolf Niel remembered, since he'd been changed, but then again, so did every other wolf in the room, God Wolf aside.

The leader took in the room and demanded. “What happened? How could you let this happen? Look at what the staff made you, and you let that break it?”

God Wolf growled.

Niel noticed that while he was holding Grant by the neck and the kangaroo had his hands on the wrist holding him, he didn't seem to have difficulty breathing.

“Do not growl at me,” the leader snapped. “You are supposed to be the best of us. Just look at you.” He paused. “Why hadn't anyone found him something to cover him with?”

Niel agreed. That package was quite the distraction.

“There hasn't been time,” one of the wolves answered.

“Then make sure it's done as soon as Tilmann has explained himself.”

“Be silent,” God Wolf snarled. There was no way Niel was thinking of someone looking like that as a Tilmann.

“Do not order me,” the leader snapped. “I am the one who gives orders not—”

“Kneel,” God Wolf ordered, and the leader, along with the three other wolves, dropped to their knees. Niel was still processing that when Wieland pulled him down, too. The only one who reacted was Grant, and Niel was sure it was because the raccoon had attracted his attention already with all the looking in his direction he’d done. Then he realized he also looked like a wolf, so he should have taken a knee too.

Had Wieland been affected too, or was he more on the ball than Niel was?

“Why can’t you just all shut up,” God Wolf said. And Niel shared a confused look. “How?” he demanded of Grant. “How do you get them to be quiet?”

The kangaroo looked confused and God Wolf smiled to himself. “Quiet,” he said in heavily accented English. “I want quiet. Too many of them. Yours are quiet, I can tell. Tell me how to make them quiet so I can hear who I am.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t lie,” God Wolf said, and Niel thought there was pleading in the tone.

“Tilmann,” the leader said in a syrupy voice, shaking himself and getting to his feet. “You are Tilmann. You are my most trusted adviser. You offered yourself to take the mantle of the holder of the staff. I trusted you with it and—”

“Lies,” God Wolf snarled, never taking his eyes off Grant. “There’s no Tilmann in here. I’m not Tilmann. I’m not yours.” The lips pulled into a scary smile. “You’re mine.”

“We are,” one of the wolves said. “You are our god.”

God Wolf straightened. “I am a god.”

“No,” the leader said, “I am in charge. I pulled us together so—”

“Don’t listen to him,” the wolf said. “You pulled us. Your power called to all of us from where you were kept. You made us want to free you so that you could rule us once again.”

“What are you doing?” the leader demanded.

“Showing my allegiance to our true leader. The only one to ever deserve our obedience.”

Whatever the wolf was doing, it worked. God Wolf smiled to himself. “One knows the truth. We all agree on this. I lead.”

“No,” the leader stated, “I—”

“Kneel.”

The leader dropped to his knees with a gasp of surprise.

“Godly Leader,” the wolf said. “Any and all loyal to your glory will obey, but let me also provide you wisdom.”

“Speak.”

“The one you hold is dangerous. You must end him while he is at your mercy. He can—”

“No.”

“Most powerful of Leaders, don’t let—”

“No.”

“But, he’s going to—”

“Silence.”

The wolf tried to speak, but no words came out of his mouth. He looked more annoyed than afraid.

“If only silencing the others was that easy. You will tell me how you accomplished it. Don’t worry about those like him. He’s only afraid of what we are. If he wasn’t mine, he’d want my death too, but I know what you are. And I will not allow an equal to be hurt or killed. You—Oh be silent too.” God Wolf rubbed his temple. “He is like us. You’d be able to tell if you weren’t so narrow-minded.” He snorted. “Get up with the times.”

“Maybe you can let go of me, then?” Grant said. “I mean, if we’re the same and all that.”

“Don’t,” the previously silent wolf said. “You can’t trust him.”

“We’re the same. You can trust yourself, right?” Grant asked.

The wolf groaned. “Don’t listen to him.”

There was something in the way he spoke that nagged at Niel.

“Come on, we’re buddies. I’ll tell you everything I know about the voices and how to silence them.”

“Yes,” God Wolf whispered. “I agree. He’s lying.”

“Come on, you know—” Grant gasped as the hand tightened around his neck.

“You have been the only one for too long,” God Wolf said. “You don’t understand that you can’t fool me any more than I can fool you. You will help me, you’ll see. Until then, you will remain by my said.”

“A Prison,” the wolf said. “Supreme Godly Leader, one like him has to be imprisoned. Put in irons and made silent, lest he turn those loyal to you to his cause.”

“Would you try to turn mine against me?” God Wolf asked Grant, tone gentle, almost as if was speaking to an old friend. Was he caressing Grant’s cheek with a thumb? He wasn’t hard or anything, so whatever was going on wasn’t sexual. God Wolf let out a defeated sigh. “Yes, he wants what is ours. Seeing us, telling him he is no longer alone, isn’t enough.”

“Yes, Godly leader. That is the wise path. I can—”

“We’ll take him,” Niel blurted out. And the wolf he’d interrupted was the only one to react. He stared at Niel as if he couldn’t believe he was there.

“You will treat him with the care you would me,” God Wolf said, now turning and looking in their direction, frowning as his gaze fell on Wieland. “You haven’t received my blessing.”

The shepherd looked God Wolf up and down. “I want to, believe me, but maybe—”

God Wolf’s growls stopped him. His eyes were on Niel, teeth bared. The hatred and anger in those eyes froze the raccoon in place. He was going to die. That divine being was going to rip him apart and eat him.

God wolf took a step in his direction, and the floor shook hard enough the giant of a wolf staggered.

Chapter Thirty-Five

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Silence followed the end of the shaking, and Niel was confused as the others in the room as to what had caused it. Then yells sounded in the distance, someone calling to others.

Had Shila called in the cavalry against Grant's wishes?

Then one of the wolves ran out, while the leader gave orders that the wolf who'd been ingratiating himself with God Wolf was trying to contradict the leader and Grant was—

Fuck, they were here to rescue Grant.

Niel grabbed the kangaroo's arm and pulled him out of God Wolf's loose grip. Then the three of them were out of the room.

"Thank God you didn't do what Grant said," Niel said, joining the running wolves.

"Don't thank anyone yet," she replied. "And pass the phone to Grant so I can talk with him."

Niel did and reached to disconnect the earpiece.

"Keep that on," Grant said. "Shila, what's going on? I know you didn't call them in."

"You want the bad news or the worse news, or the really bad news?"

Grant cursed. "Why can't you ever have good news for me? Bad news."

"The Chamber's here. They're the ones attacking."

Niel swallowed. If that was the bad news, how did it get worse? He pulled the kangaroo into a new corridor.

"At least the Nazi will be able to hold them off with the sheer number of them."

"You sure about that? Because not only are they here, but one of them has Joan of Arc's sword."

"Fuck. But that explains why Kingsley ran instead of trying to kill me."

“And there’s the even worse news. Your old friend’s here too.”

Grant stopped and Niel lost his grip, then stopped. Grant had called the mole who’d been part of the attack on the farm by that name, and the history between them was loud.

“Grant,” Niel said as the kangaroo looked in the opposite direction of where he needed him to come. “There’s more important things to do than some personal fight.”

“You don’t understand the number of people Kingsley’s destroyed, Niel.”

“You’re right, but there’s something like two hundred prisoners who need to get out of here unharmed. I think that’s more important.”

“Shila, what do they have?” the kangaroo asked, eyes closed.

“Along with the sword and Kingsley’s magnetic staff, I see a dozen more, two of which are staying close by the sword, so I think those will be emotional boosters of some sort. I can tell you there’s one of protection, one of fire. Neither side seems to care for who gets hurt in the crossfire. And there she goes. And it’s as bad as the stories say. She just turned half the nazis to her side.”

“Who?” Niel asked. “How?”

“Joan of Arc’s staff’s concept is freedom,” Shila said when Grant remained silent. “But that’s as nebulous as it gets, so in the end, it’s about conviction. Put that in the hands of someone who believes enough and you can move armies. Those armies don’t have to be your own. And whoever that woman is, she believes.”

“How the fuck did they get here so quickly?” Grant asked.

“I’m not a crystal ball, and unless you want me to drop everything I’m doing right now, I don’t have the time to get you that answer. Quick guesses are a mole or a teleportation staff.”

“No fucking way they have one of those,” Grand said. “Only a few years ago, *we* didn’t believe it was a possible concept. And we pride ourselves in thinking outside the box. The Chamber had to have someone in their ranks keeping them appraised of what the Nazis were up to.”

(and what follows is what I will have to retcon in draft 2) “The dalmatian,” Niel said, as the way the wolf spoke finally made sense. “Back in Minneapolis, there was the dalmatian with a slight German accent who approached me a few times to meet a friend of his. And he made sure I knew about the party the frat was throwing, not that I needed him to tell me about it. That’s where I had sex with Fedor, who was only there because his friend, a dalmatian with a slight German accent, had raved about those parties. Afterward, after my hospital stay and finding out what was up with me, he showed up again, and now that I think back on it, he implied pretty hard he knew what was going on with me and that he could help me out. He was also one of the people part of the kidnapper’s crew. He’s the wolf who was trying to convince God Wolf—that’s how I think of him, okay?—to have you killed.”

“Okay,” Grant said, looking like he had trouble taking it all in. “Okay. I don’t like the implications that raise, but that just means I have to stop them.”

“Which you can do after the prisoners are safely out of here,” Niel insisted.

“About that,” Shila said, and Niel shoulder’s sagged.

“Now what?”

“The explosion gave them an excuse not to wait for you to come back. Fedor’s the only one waiting for you there. Looks like he could use a pep talk, too.”

Niel cursed. Would any of them make it out, or would they get pulled into the battle? He didn’t remember much about Joan of Arc, only that she’d been able to inspire people to rise against their

oppressors. If the sword pushed the freedom buttons, the prisoners were going to be easy targets for it.

“We need to get Fedor,” Niel said.

“You do that,” Grant replied. “I’m going to go put an end to Kingsley.”

“You and what army?” Wieland asked.

“The kid’s right,” Shila said. “You have two literal armies out there duking it out. You really want to get in the middle of that?”

Grant patted his pockets. “It’s the perfect opportunity. He’s going to be distracted and—”

“It’s Kingsley,” she spat. “The man doesn’t know the meaning of the word. I’m going to give you my opinion, whether you want it or not. He isn’t here for whatever the rest of the Chamber’s here for. He’s here because he knew that you wouldn’t be able to stay away. I’m not going to go so far as to say all this was engineered to get to you, but he definitely is taking advantage of it. The best thing you can do if you want to hurt him and get out of here and make the rendez-vous with your extraction.”

Grant glared at the phone.

“I wish someone would tell me what’s going on,” Wieland said. “You two might have forgotten, but I don’t hear what’s being said.”

“There’s a rescue on the way,” Niel said before Grant could take this in another direction, “but we need to meet up with them. The prisoners have escaped in the confusion of one group of bad people attacking another group of bad people, so all we have to do is get Fedor and leave.”

“Leaving a bunch of civilians at the mercy of the Chamber and Nazis,” Grant said.

Niel folded under that intercept.

“Who you were more than willing to not care about, Grant Summer,” Shila countered with, “until it served your goals. You’re in the middle of a battlefield. Hate to say it, roo, but you need to think about your survival instead of committing suicide.”

She was right. As wrong as it felt, Niel grabbed onto that. Anything other than leaving meant they’d be dead. “Shila, how about I tell Wieland to knock Grant out and we carry him?”

“Don’t,” the kangaroo warned the german shepherd, hand reaching in a pocket.

Shila sighed. “You need him conscious and willing. Your life, Wieland’s life, and Fedor’s life are in his hands. I don’t have the power and know-how to mask the three of you.”

“That’s a low blow, Shila,” Grant replied, looking from Wieland to Niel.

“Hey, I tried being reasonable.”

“Let’s get the other,” Grant said, “and then I’ll take you to where we need to go.”

“Up,” Shila said. “You need to go up.”

* * * * *

Fedor still looked like he’d been whipped as they hurried up the stairs to the roof. It didn’t matter how many times Niel said he wasn’t to blame for the prisoners running on their own, the pallas cat was taking his inability to keep them there hard.

They passed wolfs and other canines who didn’t glance their ways due to the magic Grant had over them. Instead of an illusion that each of them was a Nazi wolf, he’d made use of the general chaos to create what he referred to as an aversion field around them. They were something no one wanted to look at, so they didn’t.

The roof showed signs of fighting, but, fortunately, no bodies or blood. Maybe the people they’d encountered had been up here and rallied by the call of the... fake Joan of Arc? Shila had her

own thing around them so they wouldn't fall under its sway.

From the roof, they had a horrible view of the fighting. Wolves against wolves, staves against machine guns, and explosions could have been grenades of another staff.

"One thing I don't get," Niel said, pulling away so he wouldn't see the carnage anymore. "Is why they're still here? You broke the staff. Unless I'm wrong about that wolf being the dalmatian working for them, they know there's nothing here for them anymore."

"If you're right, then they know there's something here for them," Grant said unhappily. "The one you call God Wolf... I think he's the staff now."

"Can that happen?" Niel asked. Wieland looked confused and Fedor was sitting to the side, not paying them any attention.

"No," Shila replied.

"There is no proof it can't be done, Shila," Grant said. "Even with magic, you can't prove a negative. He controlled those wolves. Even the Chamber one reacted with what he was told to do, and I could see him fight it. I wasn't surprised when he couldn't prevent him since someone mundane wouldn't be able to hold up against that power, but if he's Chamber, that's even more impressive."

"Okay, how?"

"That... I don't know. He was still holding it when I broke it. It's the first time that's happened. So maybe? I don't know, maybe the power transferred at that moment? How do you expect me to know, Shila?" he demanded in exasperation. "I don't even know how I do what I'm doing."

Niel looked over the edge at the battle, then at the sky. "Shila, any idea when that rescue's going to be here? It's looking like the Chamber's got this and we aren't going to be safe once they've taken control."

"I lost track of him when he ended up too far of anything with a signal, but he's making good time. He'll be there before anything much happens."

The howl made Niel's blood freeze; he was amazed he didn't piss himself. It was a predator, the predator of predators, and it was after him. It would get him. There was no avoiding that. He was dead; it wasn't even worth running. All that would do was make it hungrier and then it wasn't just him, it would devour, but—

It was just a howl.

Next to him, Grant was panting, holding something that looked like a Dreamcatcher. Or at least a net between sticks.

"What the fuck was that?" the kangaroo. Like Niel, he was still shaking.

"Fuck if I know," Shila replied. "With the disruption I have around the lot of you, that shouldn't have affected you."

"I think we've all underestimated what the Staff of Storger is capable of."

Niel looked over the parapet. There was a pause in the fighting as confusion re3ign. The woman holding the sword was screaming orders and God Wolf, dressed in a mix between a Nazi uniform and medieval armor, was yelling his own orders. Between the two, lines were slowly forming, and Niel could tell who God Wolf had better control of. Those who had been changed by the staff, as more wolves stepped to his side and the rest to the Chamber's. It might be equal, it might be more in favor of one or the other. Niel couldn't tell.

At least, his attention was on the battlefield and not—

God Wolf looked up at Niel.

Why did he keep doing that to himself?

“Grant,” Niel started, intending to give a warning, but God Wolf leaped in their direction.

Of fuck. They were so screwed.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Niel hurried to back away from the side of the building. “Grant!” God Wolf’s leap hadn’t taken him to them, but he’d landed close enough climbing the rest of the way, i.e.: the side of the building, was proving faster.

“You can’t use the stairs,” Shila said in his ear and the phone in Grant’s hand.

“That doesn’t give us many options,” the kangaroo said, as they stop halfway to them. “I don’t know what I can do against him. There’s no telling what a sentient staff can do.”

“I’m working on it,” Shila replied.

“What happens?” Fedor asked, looking like he was waking up. Finally pulling out of the funk enough to notice their surroundings.

“That,” Wieland said, pointing to the ultimate version of what a wolf could be. Even if this one was dressed in a mix of Nazi uniform that didn’t fit him, compensating with some plate armor for what had to have come from a museum (can I put this in a room Niel looks in? A trophy of some sort for the previous owner?)

“Stall,” Shila said, in his ear only.

“What?” Niel asked and drew the gaze of God Wolf.

“I finally got your transport’s GPS again. He’s close. You just need to hold them off for a while.”

Niel wanted to ask what ‘a while’ meant here, but God Wolf was staring at him.

“Good,” he said, the word stretched as if he was enjoying the taste of it. “You no longer pretend to be one of your betters.”

“Better?” Niel spat. He’d expected, well hoped, that with being more than just a Nazi, there would be something like a reasonable person there. But maybe whatever this guy was now, there was still a lot of who he had been.

“Yes, better.” God Wolf straightened. Was he taller? “We are more than you. We have power, knowledge, forces. We will rule over you as the benefactor you deserve. We will make this world our

paradise.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Grant said. Maybe he’d heard what Shila said. Niel hopes so because he had no idea how to stall some definitely not sane magical person-thing. “You can’t let the power control you. That’s only going to lead to destruction. Look,” he said as God Wolf settled his angry gaze on him. How Grant didn’t buckle under it, Niel had no idea. “There’s someone in there. You have to take control. You need to remember who you were. Pull back to that. If you do that, I can help you. I can teach you how to use the power you now have. How to not get overwhelmed by it, not have it burn you out.”

Okay, did trying to reason with the insane magic person-thing count as stalling?

“Help me?” God Wolf’s smile didn’t look friendly. “I am the God of Canines. I do not need help, even from you. You will be at my side, where you belong. You will help me, but only when I tell you to. But you.” He looked at Wieland, “deserve my blessing. I will make you one of the blessed, who will rule over—”

“No,” the German shepherd said.

God Wolf smiled. “I am benevolent. I understand you don’t know what I offer. So I won’t take offense. I will still bless you.”

“No.” This time Wieland spoke through clenched teeth.

“Come to me,” God Wolf ordered. “Come to your god.”

Fedor grabbed the German shepherd, but a shrug sent the cat to the ground as Wieland staggered forward.

Niel looked at Grant, who was going through his pockets, looking desperate.

“Don’t resist. You will love how I remake you in my image. Your god will look kindly on you.”

Wieland was before him, a hand on God Wolf’s armor-plated chest. The large wolf smiled at the gesture as the hand moved over the metal until it reached the edge that was over the black uniform. The fingers curled on it, bending the metal and with a scream, Wieland threw God Wolf away.

Niel followed the trajectory as God Wolf hit the side of the stairwell building and ricocheted away.

“You are not my god!” Wieland screamed, then was panting.

Niel’s attention was pulled away from God Wolf by movement inside the now partially demolished building. People were getting to their feet, then Nazis burst through the door, on wolf hurrying to God Wolf’s side.

“Do not hurt the one like me!” God Wolf order. “Do not kill the one that is mine.” He stood. “Do what you want with the other two.”

“Oh, I will be happy to,” one of the Nazi wolves said from the doorway, and Niel recognized the voice.

“Isamu,” Niel said, swallowing his worry. That transport had better get here soon. To the side, that other wolf was fussing over God Wolf the way a sycophant did.

“Niel,” the ex-kishu said hatefully. “You will not best me again.” He picked up a small piece of broken brick and smiled. “I won’t kill you.” He bounced it in his hand. “I have plans for your ass.” He placed the broken brick between his finger, preparing to flick it. “But I think you can do with a good amount of blood loss before that.”

“Now!” the wolf fussing over God Wolf yelled as he flung something around God Wolf’s neck. The distraction caused Isamu’s flicked brick to hit Niel in the cheek and slice it open. Before Isamu

could get over the surprise of seeing God Wolf collared and forced to his knees, something detonated within what was left of the building behind them, and it, and the Nazis before it, went flying. The front took the brunt of what that had been, and those there, including Isamu, flew over the side of the building.

Niel didn't want to wish anyone broke their neck from such a fall, but Isamu's behavior made that tough.

A vole stepped through the dust, brushing his black suit's shoulder where the long black and red staff rested. "Grant." He grinned. "What a pleasure to see you here."

"Kingsley," the kangaroo said through gritted teeth.

"Now." The vole stepped forward and people stepped onto the roof. The woman with Joan of Arc's sword was among them. A man with a staff made of... parts of a windmill? Was on her side, on the other side, a small woman held what looked like a hand weight. "I'm glad this is finally coming to an end, Grant. You have been a... annoyance for too long."

"Don't kill him," the wolf holding the collared God Wolf said.

The vole closed his eyes with and let out an exasperated sigh. "Bentley, I know this is your operation, but Grant's mine. That was the agreement when I brought my force to support you. I help in whatever way I can with this over boosting a staff you were playing with, and when Grant showed up, I got to end him."

"That was before this guy happened," the wolf said, shaking God Wolf. "And he keeps referring to that one as his equal. I think figuring out how the power of a staff was poured into someone and why that person thinks this guy's important takes precedence over whatever vendetta you have."

"Vendetta? You think this is what this is?" the vole demanded. "Do you have any idea how many of our Practitioners slipped through our fingers because of this one man? How many staves we lost to him? And that was before he fucking started breaking them!"

"Get everyone close together," Shila whispered in his ear.

"He is a fucking menace to us and he has to be ended."

Niel stepped before Grant, grabbed Fedor by the arm, and backed away.

"What are you doing?" Grant whispered when Niel back into him, taking a step back.

"What does it look like? Getting us away from the freak show with the sticks."

The vole looked at them, seemingly amused. "You're the Irvine kid, right? You don't usually go for people outside your little group, Summer. Or are you looking after him because he was part of Bentley's little project?"

"You think I'm a good person only to the people you threaten, Kingsley? That'd make me no better than the rest of you."

"A yes, the savior complex. I have no idea how that never got you killed." The vole motioned with his staff and metal started rising off the roof. "That's not going to help you, kid. So how about you just stop?"

"I'll stop them," Wieland said, stepping by them.

"No." Niel grabbed his arm and fortunately, the german shepherd stopped, looking at him. "You can't do anything against them." Where was that fucking super quiet helicopter or jet or whatever was coming to get them out of this?

There was someone new next to him.

Niel only had the time to look at the rat grabbing him and Grant, hear the start of the vole yell, and they were elsewhere.

* * * * *

Thomas dropped to the floor before anyone could catch him.

“The bed,” a capybara ordered. “Limbani, do what you do.” Olavo looked them over, then cursed. “We need healing here!”

Niel touched his cheek. It wasn’t that bad.

Wieland pulled on him, and the raccoon found himself having to keep the german shepherd standing. He had a long piece of jagged metal in his side. German shepherd rushed into the room and took Wieland off his hands.

“Niel!” a rat hugged him. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

He hugged Roland back. “That makes two of us.”

“You do something like that again, and I am kicking you in the balls so hard you’ll have to get my brother to take you to the moon to find them.”

“So long as everyone’s safe, you don’t have to worry about anything.”

Roland groaned in his chest.

“Where are we?” Grant asked as Fedor found a chair and sat.

“Stuber estate,” Olavo replied. Halfway between Florence and Bologna in Italy. “It was the closest place we could find and with a Stuber being one of the kidnappees, it made sense to contact them.”

“I wasn’t aware anyone was talking with them,” Grant said.

“With all due respect, Mister Summer, but none of us are under any obligation to keep you up to date on what we do. We appreciate you offered to help, but Thomas had told me a few things about you, like your habit of deciding what’s important, instead of sticking to a plan.” Olavo raised a hand to cut off the kangaroo’s reply. “Unlike someone else, I’m not mad. I just planned accordingly. I knew this was a rescue, even if a few of you didn’t seem to realize that.”

“What are you even doing here? Lav?” Niel asked. “Last time I saw you, you were in Minneapolis.”

Roland snorted in Niel’s chest. “You do have to stop forgetting my brother can teleport.”

“Right. How is he? The other times didn’t seem to hit him this hard.”

“He isn’t familiar enough with this room to be able to use it as an arrival point without a significant drain on his energy,” Olavo said. “And in setting up the rescue, he didn’t take as much as the time as he should have having sex in it so he’d minimize the impact.” Olavo looked to the bed, where the monkey and rats were going at it hard. “Hence why Limbani’s here, despite all the reasons he should have never been part of this.”

“How about Dario? Did you guy find him?”

“We did. Thomas took him home.”

“About the town, there are—”

“Niel,” Olavo said. “You just got rescued, finally. I think there’s a rat who wants to welcome you back, and if you don’t let him take you to another room now, he’s going to do it right here.”

Niel looked at the grinning Roland.

“I am running out of patience.”

* * * * *

Niel stepped out of the bedroom where he and Roland had been celebrating. The rat was fast asleep, but Niel was still too amped up, so he intended to make coffee, enjoy the taste of it, maybe make a sandwich. That was another thing he wouldn't mind tasting. He was so happy not needing to eat hadn't meant an inability to do so.

A door closed, and he looked behind him, thinking he'd woken Roland. Instead, a raccoon in a familiar leather jacket was walking away, bags in hand. Jarod even had the fucking hat on this time.

“So,” Niel said, only loud enough to be heard, but, hopefully, not disturb anyone who might be sleeping. He had no idea what time it was locally. “Just going to vanish without a trace before we can talk?” Roland had told him Jarod was in the building, but Niel hadn't felt in a hurry to get to him then. Or now. He should have guessed his biological father would try to leave before they could talk.

Jarod Irvine's shoulders slumped, and he stopped. When he turned, Niel was only a dozen feet away. “Look,” Jarod said. “You need to get over the idea that we're related. We share blood and that's it. It doesn't mean anything.” He stopped. “Okay, it means something, but not that I'm obligated to be someone to you that I'm not. I have my life, and it had nothing to do with yours.” He looked at Niel expectantly.

“Done?” Niel asked and Jarod nodded. “I have a father, and you're not it.” He hadn't intended on opening with that, saying it at all since until the words were out, Niel still hadn't been sure how he felt about the man standing before him. But that assumption that the only thing Niel might want to talk about, after everything that had happened, would be about Jarod or any kind of relationship Niel wanted was just enough to show how egocentric the man was.

And Niel did have a father. One he couldn't wait to return to.

“What do you think of that magic wolf person thing?” Niel asked, and the question seemed to catch Jarod by surprise.

“I don't know what to think. (I don't remember if how the survivors came in possession of the staff was ever established in our conversations, so I'm going to lean on the ‘Indiana Jones aspect of Jarods here) When I found the bone among items destined for Hitler's private vault I knew I needed to keep it out of his hands. I had a few encounters with Practitioners before then, and I asked for their help. With their magic and making it so that one of each of the survivor bloodlines was part of the key, I thought it ensure no one would ever get to it.”

“Because you'd never have a son who would be initiated.”

Jarod nodded.

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

“Excuse me?”

“You screwed up, Jarod. Instead of destroying the thing, you went all Indiana Jones and decided you knew how to keep this from getting worse.”

“You don't know what it was like,” the young-looking raccoon said.

“True, but trust me when I say that's going to change. If you aren't interested in telling me, I'm sure I can piece it together from the history books and the friends I'm making. But the fact remains, your ego allowed this to happen. So what are you going to do about it? Or are you just going to go home to your family and shove your head in the sand until the Chamber takes this and does something

bad with it? I doubt Grant's going to tell me there's much hope them having under their control someone like God Wolf—don't even start—will lead to anything good.”

“You do not get to dictate to me what I have to do.”

Niel got in Jarod's face. “You fucking better believe I get to, considering I'm in this mess because of you. And I don't mean because you fathered me. I had a lot of time with nothing to do but think through all this and while very little of it made sense until recently, the fact that the guy in charge of what happened with those Nazis wasn't just one of the kidnapers, but he actively tried to get me and Fedor to have sex tells me he knew who I was even when I didn't, there's only one way that happens since you were with my dad only for a very short time. The Chamber's been watching you for that long. Probably waiting for you to have a son so they could get the last piece of the key to that lock. And you had no idea. I'm not going to let your carelessness endanger my half-sisters. So get your head out of your fucking head out of your ass and deal with this mess you made before it blows up even further and destroys that idyllic family you seem to be willing to sacrifice everyone else for.”

Jarod was not happy, but he didn't storm off, so Niel thought that was progress. “I will make sure this doesn't progress beyond what has already happened.”

“Not by leaving you aren't. You need to talk with Grant. He knows stuff about what happened.”

“I don't need you to—”

“Get off your fucking horse! I'm a kid and I'm making plans to be able to help with this. You're supposed to be an adult, so why don't you start acting like one? This isn't a movie where you ride into the sunset.”

“You're going to be part of this?” Jarod asked, the disbelief dripping so hard Niel expected his feet to get wet.

“Yeah, because I'm no longer sure I can trust the adult to do their job.” He turned. “But before I can do that, I've got to get back home, and I fucking hope getting kidnapped gets me an extension on those exams I missed.”

#

Chapter Thirty-Seven

#

The dean of the University of Minnesota was an older buck who stood tall and dignified. Niel had never interacted with him, until now, but he'd seen him speak back on his first day, in the auditorium and had been close enough to see him.

Standing in the same office as the man, after he had been confronted with irrefutable proof magic was real, had shattered a lot of that confident exterior the man had carried on that day. Most of that was now in the body language of the other older gentleman in the office; the Margay who lead the Richard family, Morgan Richard (I don't believe the elder has ever been named, but if you have a better name for him, feel free to change it).

Magic was difficult to deny when the man before you created lightning around his hands strong enough every piece of electronic in the office had reacted to it. Niel figured it was a mark of his control over it that nothing had been fried.

The buck swallowed and cast a glance at Niel and Fedor. "Do they..." he trailed off.

"No," Morgan said. "They can't do what I can, and if they could, they'd know better than to do so. But their differences, even if they cannot be seen, are why they were taken. They aren't the only such students you have, and it's now clear that this is a danger that you must be made aware of."

The buck's worry shifted to calculation, then suspicion. "The incident with Sigma Theta Gamma a few years ago."

"Yes, that is part of what I intend to discuss with you."

The dean nodded. “Mister Leslie, Mister Shevet, I think you can leave now.”

Fedor headed for the door, but Niel hesitated. “Mister Richards, maybe I...”

The margay shook his head. “Dean Matheson is correct. What will be discussed going forward isn’t anything you need to be involved with.”

Need, possibly not, but Niel still wished he had a good argument for staying. If he’d known everything about his family lineage, none of this would have happened, or so he told himself. This was just more that would be kept from him, but still affected him.

Still, even if he wasn’t actually part of the Society, as most of the Survivors he’d met reminded him, Morgan Richard was a man who had power within Minneapolis beyond being Society, and his family had been key in helping Niel deal with some of what happened.

He followed Fedor outside and was immediately hugged by Kuno.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Niel replied, noting the disapproving way the secretary was eying them. “I just wish I was included in what they’re talking about.”

“Not really.” The margay took his arm and Fedor and lead them out of the room. Niel tilted an ear at his friend. Was he purposely offending the secretary? The pallas cat let himself be led without signs of even being aware of what was happening.

They’d only been back hours and hadn’t had time to do much. Thomas had dropped them at the frat, since it was the one place in the city he didn’t need to clear his arrival first. Kuno had been there and on the phone, calling his family to let them know, and before Niel could call his dad, they were on the way to the administration building, where the Richard Elder waited for them.

Now that he wasn’t required to be there, there were things Niel wanted to check in on. “How’s Erwin?”

Kuno stopped. He looked at Niel and the raccoon closed his eyes. He’d hoped he’d remembered what he saw wrong.

“They found his body, but he didn’t have any ID, and a naked guy found in a football stadium room isn’t something they want advertised. It was three days before he was identified, then his family called the frat, and we realized you were missing. I wish we’d known earlier, then we—”

“You wouldn’t have been able to do much. This was well organized. I think even the people doing the kidnapping didn’t know what they were really part of, except for the one behind it all. And he had magic too.”

Kuno nodded. “That was the prevailing theory once it became nearly impossible to locate you or Fedor, once we realized he was missing too.”

“Dario?”

“I didn’t find out about him until you and I were connected. Lav was busy with the rescue and his family doesn’t share much at the best of time. I’m close enough to you, one of my cousins was able to link us. But there was nothing I could use in what you saw, hear, or smelled, beyond the seawater. That’s how we figured out you were on a boat, but without knowing where the boat was... There was a lot of luck, and a whole lot more determination, involved in working out where you were.”

They stepped outside and the cold hit Niel again. After his time in Europe, the Minnesota winter felt even more biting. “My dad?” Niel couldn’t wait to see him, but knowing how freaked he was about the kidnapping would help.

“He’s okay. He’s better now that he knows you’re safe. He wanted to be part of the rescue once he knew it was happening, but he was a lot more chill about being sidelined than some of the people who weren’t allowed in. I think if not for the travel to Europe, the entire frat would have been there. We’re lucky Lav took Limbani, because he might have been able to talk Thomas into teleporting all of them there. Speaking of the frat, Fedor, we talked it over and Survivors are Society enough for you to move in.”

The pallas cat startled and looked at them, gaze distant.

“You okay, Fedor?” Niel asked.

“Da,” he answered after a long silence. “Thinking. Lost in head.” He’d been withdrawn for a while now, even before they were rescued.

“I said you’re welcome to move into Sigma Theta Gamma,” Kuno said.

Fedor nodded. “Will think on it.” He looked in the distance. “Will think on many things.”

“Well, the invitation stands.” Kuno looked at the sky. “I just hope everyone out there forgets we exist for a couple more years. The moment I’ve graduated, Denton Brislow can descent on this place and turn it into Security Central for all I care.”

“Isn’t he really important?” Niel asked. The name didn’t come up often, but each time there was enough awe along with it to leave the raccoon wondering how much of it was fabricated.

“And scary, and he’s supposed to be really strict about how things get done and the rule. The rulebook for his company is supposed to be like a thousand-page thick.” Kuno paused and smiled. “Supposed to be amazing in bed. Heard he’s like He’s fucking you. So who knows, maybe it’d be worth applying there.”

“Going to drop your major for some tail?”

“Godlike tail,” Kuno replied, then shook his head. “But probably not. It’s one thing knowing everything I do about military tactics and how to handle weapons. It’s another having to make use of it.”

Niel nodded. He hadn’t been involved in that fight directly, but he’d heard the stories. “This is my stop,” he said, pointing to the bus stop.

“You know I can drive you,” Kuno said. “Limbani’s back too, so he’ll be happy to come with us, keep you from getting too worried.”

“I need some time to think,” Niel replied. “I haven’t had any since arriving with your elder and the meeting with the Dean.” He looked to Fedor, who was lost in thought again. “And I think he needs more attention than I do. Whatever happened to him while we were separated, it hit him worse than me, or Wieland, in spite of a piece of metal in his side.” He shook his head. “I’ll tell you later. Right now, I have to go home.”

The margay pulled him in another hug. “Glad you’re back, buddy.”

“Me too, thanks.”

Then Niel left his friend with Fedor and started home.

* * * * *

It was a good thing this had happened in winter, Niel decided, and he finally started on the path leading to his house’s door. Any other seasons and he might have found reasons after reasons to delay getting off the sidewalk. As it was, now he wanted to be inside just to get out of the fucking cold.

He reached for the handle and stopped. It was his home, and yet, there was a sense he was a stranger here. He hadn’t been gone so long this should feel like a stranger’s home, but a lot had

happened. Enough, he didn't know he was done processing most of it. Instead of reaching for the handle again, he knocked.

After a few seconds without hearing movement in the house, Niel worried, then realized his father might not have a reason to hurry. He'd been told Niel was okay, but had he been told he was back? Niel didn't knock normally, so as far as his father knew, it was one of the religious people come to—

The door opened and his father stared at him.

"Hey Dad," Niel said, feeling foolish as he gave him a small wave.

"Niel!" Stewart stepped aside and opened the door. "Come in, you have to be freezing." Once he was inside, his father started to hug him, then stepped away. "Let me take your coat." He frowned. "That's not your coat. What happened to it?"

Niel had no idea. He hadn't even thought about what had happened to his clothing. He'd been taken naked, so that might still be at the police station with the rest of the evidence.

"Let me turn up the heat. I don't want you to catch a cold." The raccoon fiddled with the thermostat. "How about some hot chicken soup? Or maybe you want something heavier after..." His ears droop. "Fuck, I'm sorry. Here I am offering you food and you don't eat anymore. Let me get—"

"Dad, stop. It's fine, I'm fine." When his father didn't lose any agitation, Niel crossed the space separating them and hugged him tightly.

His father grabbed on to him. "I was so scared I'd lost you."

"They told you I was fine, didn't they?"

Stewart tightened his grip and Niel realized it wasn't the physical danger his father had been the most scared of. "Jarod doesn't want anything to do with me." His father didn't relax. "And the feeling's mutual."

Stewart relaxed.

"I'd take that soup if you were serious about it, or a sandwich. I have been craving the taste of a roast beef sandwich for the last few days, for some reason."

"I only have ham," Stewart said, disappointed.

"I'll take ham," Niel said, smiling before his father could offer to get roast beef. "So long as we sit down and talk. I need to tell you what happened and some of the decisions I've made because of it."

As his father prepared food, a lot more than was needed for two, Niel gave him a mildly sanitized version of what he had gone through. When he'd mentioned how they used him and the others while traveling across the ocean, Niel saw for the first time that his father might be capable of murder. He had to remind him that he needed the sex to live now, but that had only diminished the murderous intent.

He ate slowly as he spoke. He didn't think food had ever tasted this good, and his father spent most of the time watching him instead of eating the food he'd prepared. By the time Niel was done with the amazing sandwich, he was done with the story and particularly proud of the timing.

"So," he said. "I met with the Dean, well I was in the office while the Elder of the Richard Family met with him. They'll come up with something to explain my absence, and I'll get to retake all the exams I missed, get to hand over whatever work has been required since then. It's going to be a lot of work, but I have access to magic now, and one of the things we can do with it is eliminate the need for sleep." He grinned as he said that, but his father didn't return the smile. "I'm planning on finishing the

year here.”

Stewart winced.

Niel put the cup down without drinking from it. He hadn't meant for his father to take that personally. "I need to make changes, Dad, and I don't think I can do that here."

His father nodded without looking at him.

"Right now I'm looking at San Francisco."

That made Stewart look up in surprise. Had his father thought Niel was going to say he was heading overseas? Didn't he believe him when Niel said he wasn't interested in maintaining a relationship with Jarod Irvine? A direct one, at least.

"Why San Francisco?" his father asked, sounding interested now. As if he was questioning his son's judgment, instead of being afraid of the reasons.

"Roland."

Stewart smiled.

"He... We... we talked." There had been more than just sex during their celebration. There had been talking and one solid argument. "He's going there now that he's eighteen. He had a few friends, and he tells me the schools are good. And that the sports teams are getting a lot better, but that they could still use some top-notch players like him and me." Niel stopped, remembering the argument. "I don't know if I'm going to be playing football there, though."

"Why not? You love it, and I don't know if you can afford the tuition without some form of support."

"Money's not going to be a problem." He didn't go into details. Niel hadn't quite believed Roland when he said his family was rich now. The idea of teleportation and Thomas being the only one able to do it, well, along with Firmin, but he could only sometimes do it, being worth a lot of money to the people who know of it was just so out there when he thought of his best friend and the normal family he was part of.

Niel didn't like the idea of Roland paying for his tuition, especially not with some of the other things they'd talked about. He hadn't made him playing football a condition, and Niel wanted to trust Roland that it wouldn't become one once he had moved there, but he'd discovered that one of the consequences of what he'd gone through was that he couldn't trust anyone entirely.

And he hated that.

"With what's happening, I need to do more than just play sports. I need to prepare. That means school and my body. I was basically at everyone's mercy during this. The few times I could do something, I was so outclassed it's a miracle I got out of any of it. Roland's friends know people in San Francisco who can help me learn to defend myself. One of them works at a private security company, so he thinks he can get me private lessons with some of the experts there. I'm not abandoning my history classes," he added at the worried expression his father gave him. "In fact, with what I gleaned, I think knowing a whole lot more about history is important."

Stewart nodded and squared his shoulders. "If you think that's what's best for you, Niel. You know I'll stand behind you the entire way."

"Would you move for me?"

"What?"

Niel chuckled at his father's confusion. "Through those friends Roland has, he's confident he

can get you a job. The way he explains it, his friends are friends with some of the people basically in charge of the city. I didn't get the entirety of it, but it's also linked to magic and the Society. But the bottom line is that if you want to come with me, you will have a job waiting for you there."

"And you're determined to follow Roland there."

Niel nodded. "I think..." he swallowed. Wow, was this harder than he'd expected to say. "I think that after everything my boyfriend did to get me back, it's important I be with him and see what this turns into."

"So it's serious between you two?"

"We think so."

Stewart sighed theatrically. "Well, not that it's a surprise, but there goes any hope I've had for grandkids."

Niel took his cup of coffee. "Oh, I don't know. I mean, there is magic, after all." He took a slow sip and watched his father's utter shock as what that meant sunk in.

Well, it wasn't like there were any chances he and Roland would stop trying to impregnate each other. Roland basically lived for sex now, and Niel needed sex to live.

They were practically perfect for each other.

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