

## Chapter One

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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.

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