

Chapter One

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.”

#

* * *