

Chapter 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.”

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