

Chapter One

“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.

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“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 it’s 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.

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