

Chapter One

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.

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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.”

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“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.

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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.”

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