

## Chapter One

Niel did his best not to pull at the coveralls he wore or move too quickly as he pushed the wheeled bucket around using the mop handle. Finding coveralls he could even fit into had been surprising enough, with the other janitors they'd located looking more like the house cat, health-wise than Niel. He could guess what the Neo-Nazis had done to the healthier part of the non-canine population when they'd moved in, but didn't want to think about it.

He'd asked Grant why he didn't use magic to make it fit, and the kangaroo had told him he needed to remain close for it to be powered. That had caused a minor freakout on the raccoon's part at what might have happened when the two were separated, but Grant reassured him that while Niel might have lost track of him, he had never been far from the raccoon.

Grant had used magic to both make himself look like the house cat, after getting him to lead them to the supplies and uniform for Niel, and then making him sleep so there were no chances he'd go running to his overlords, or have one of them notice there were two of them walking around. Then, Grant had headed to find the main offices, figuring that was where the leadership would eventually go to, once they were done in the impromptu auditorium, and Niel headed to find... well, where ever a prisoner could be held.

The factory had a lot of concrete walls, so just about any room could hold someone. He didn't see anything resembling the large vents movies like to imply were in any place converted to hold prisoners. The one thing he figured on was that it wouldn't be a room with an outside wall. No matter how thick those were, they'd be the least secure ones.

He kept his head down and shoulders hunched as men hurried by. Not one of them glanced at him since anyone not of lupine descent was beneath their notice, but it only took one to be more attentive, one clever guy among what Niel felt was a sea of amateur, and he'd be found out, and if he was lucky, he'd discover where the prison was, by being thrown into it.

It was much like when his team played against a weaker one. Coach Horgar was always on

them not to let a series of losses make them think the opposition couldn't come up with clever plays and steal a victory from a team that got overconfident.

So Niel acted as if most of the Nazis hurrying by were clever and, because, with the atmosphere of victory they emanated, Niel wasn't confident the prison was where he'd end up if caught.

Niel put the mop back into the bucket once the group was out of sight and moved to the next door, opening it, looking in to confirm it was empty, then making sure no one was in the hall to see him not do the job they expected a janitor would do and close the door and move on to the next.

The worry that Wieland and Fedor weren't even in this building crossed his mind, and he ignored it. He couldn't let fear paralyze him. If he confirmed they weren't here, then he'd work on figuring out where else they might be. If he was lucky, Grant would have retrieved the staff, called in the cavalry and Wieland would be enjoying a celebratory fuck by the time Niel reached him.

Steps sounded, and Niel pulled the mop from the bucket, sloshing the dirty water on the floor.

"Reiniger!" a man called and Niel hoped the answer would come quickly because how long could someone watch him, even if only out of their peripheral vision before they noticed he was cleaning the same spot over and over? Maybe he should move, but he was scared that attracting the attention of any Nazi would lead to the raccoon being revealed, and then he'd probably be tortured just so they could laugh.

The call came again, annoyed this time, and when no one answered, the steps resumed, and were approaching. Of course, whoever this guy was after was somewhere behind Niel. Maybe he'd pass quickly and be—

The hand pulled him to face the German shepherd before it registered they were next to Niel, and the dog let out a string of German too fast for Niel to make out. He stared at that angry face, trying to get his mind to get into gear.

"Come on," the German shepherd said in disgusted English with a Louisiana accent. "I thought all of you bastard had been taught German."

"Know English," Niel squeaked and startled himself.

"There's that at least." The dog leaned into Niel's face and spoke slow and loud. "Go clean the mess in the office."

Niel nodded eagerly, and the dog left in the opposite direction he'd come from. Hands shaking, he put the mop back in the bucket and headed for where he'd been instructed. That had been too close. What if he'd started speaking Italian? About the only Italian word he knew was pizza.

And worry about not finding the office vanished when he saw the open door after turning the indicated corner. Approaching, laughter exploded, then German. Reluctantly, he poked his head into the room.

Five wolves sat around a table with bottles of wine and filled glasses. Niel stared as one took a leg bone and put it over a shoulder as if he was resting a sword there. Hadn't the general had larger shoulders? Niel wondered. But then again, he'd been in the audience, far from the man as he transformed. Maybe it had been an effect of the change. He'd seemed larger than he really was.

One of the wolves noticed him in the door and barked something in Italian, motioning for a shattered glass on the floor among spilled wine. No need for a translator on that one.

"Didn't last long," was all Niel made out from what one of the wolves told the others, in German. "You longer?" He wished they'd slow down so he could work out when they said better.

“Stronger,” among a lot of other stuff, the one holding the staff said. More German. “Not go.” Subtitles. That was what Niel needed. He could read that fast.

“Still good. Make stronger ones.”

Niel slowly mopped the floor, watching them. He was sure they’d each undergone the change, and seeing them up close, he could tell there weren’t identical, which had been what it seemed like at a distance. One’s fur had more russet to it, while another had a silver sheen, and another was darker.

He counted one glass for each of them, so whose glass was shattered on the floor? The one german shepherd’s? Niel had trouble imagining that one in the company of these wolves. Maybe it was that he’d been American, and these were clearly German.

The conversation didn’t stop, but Niel could put little together that was useful. Something about more of them would make something stronger. Their army?

“Hausmeister,” one called, and Niel recognized that word. Janitor. He looked up, and the wolf said something in rapid... Italian? It certainly wasn’t German.

“I know German,” Niel said, aiming for proud meekness. One thing history taught was that oppressors enjoyed being looked up to by their victims.

The one with the staff laughed and said something Niel thought was about the mongrel who thought he was worth the tongue. He didn’t hide his confusion.

“Get those to the cleaner,” the one who’d called him said and pointed to a set of folded clothes on a counter. The boots were next to them.

He nodded and hurried to finish cleaning the floor. Why one of them had brought a full uniform, including the boots here, Niel didn’t know, but they’d given him an excuse to get out of here and back to his search.

Another wolf looked into the room, then gave a salute. “Leutnant Kieseletter, more are ready.”

The wolf with the staff drained his glass, then stood. He tapped a bottle. “Keep for me.” Then he followed the wolf away.

The four left burst out in laughter and immediately emptied the bottle in their glasses, then raised it to the honor of the late leutnant Kieseletter. Niel grabbed the uniform and hurried out. Did the duty of changing the other canines into wolves come with some sort of ceremonial sacrifice he’d missed because Grant had pulled him out?

And what was he supposed to do with the uniform? He didn’t remember seeing a place that cleaned clothing in the rooms he’d looked into. Was he expected to take this to the local laundry shop? Or worse, for him to clean them himself? If he dumped this in the trash, would anyone notice? Could he use it as an excuse to wander around the building? Use his broken German to explain he was looking for the laundry?

It would be a hell of a lot faster than having to push that bucket and wash a floor anytime a group of people walked by him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maybe he didn’t even need the set of clothes, Niel decided after another group of Nazis, these mostly wolves with muscular build of one transformed, walked by him without even glancing in his direction. Maybe now that they were their version of perfect, anyone not a canine just didn’t exist for them.

With them gone, he opened the door and looked into yet another empty office. Maybe it was

time for him to admit defeat and just ask one of the wolves to take him to the prison. Then he could use some clever... whatever to overpower the near-perfect specimen of sentient predators and rescue Wieland and Fedor.

He opened yet another door to what would be an empty office and found himself staring at a house cat with a phone to his ear, staring back at him. Before Niel could slam the door and think about where to run, the cat said. "Shila, give me a second," to the person on the other end.

The voice was Grant's.

Shila was a name Niel knew. Grant had him call her before they'd taken in the disguises of Nazis, and she'd called him, all the way back at the farm.

"Get in here and close the door, Niel," Grant hissed. "Yes, he's here. Of course, he's fine. Shila, I said I'd call you every hour, that's what I'm doing. If I, or Niel, miss the next one, you have my permission to tell the others where we are."

Niel didn't hear the words, as Grant pulled the phone for his ear, but the tone came in loudly. Whoever this Shila was, she didn't need his permission to do one damn thing.

"Oh don't give me that," he snapped at her, phone back to his ear. "This is nothing like that. They were Chamber, the staves didn't belong to them. This guy, that he asked for it or not, that he knows it or not, is one of us. Of course, him being a Neo-Nazi matters, but Fuck, Shila, what are the others going to think if I start breaking Practitioner's staves?"

"Grant?" Niel called and the house cat-looking Kangaroo raised a finger to stop him.

"Oh, really? No one will know? Like you won't hold this over me." The cat ran a hand over his face. "I'm sorry. You're right, you wouldn't do that to me. But this is the kind of thing that's going to come back to bite me in the tail, Shila, I can't just—"

"He doesn't have the staff anymore."

Grant stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"The guy on the stage isn't who has the staff anymore. It's some other wolf, a lieutenant one thing or another."

Grant shook his head. "You didn't hear right. A staff doesn't just get passed from one person to another. He won't understand why, but he isn't going to let someone else take his staff. It takes a while until we build enough of a connection and trust so we can make the effort to let someone else handle it."

"I saw him. He had it, and they were drinking wine. Then he was called out to make more transformation, and they toasted him as if he was about to die."

Shila said something that made Grant break the stare.

"I don't know," he finally said. "Anytime I find someone with a new staff, the first thing I tell them is to not push themselves." He listened. "Yeah, I think you're right. Even brand new, without training, he'd know what he was doing, what was about to happen. He'd have to make a conscious decision to push himself into apotheosis. I can see him doing it because of his belief. He wouldn't be the first, but for the Nazis to just take it and hand it to someone else? Who knows how many they're going to go through before they're done with the changes?"

Grant leaned against the wall. "You're right. This puts them on par with the Chamber, which means that anyone who picks up the staff after that basically forces himself onto it. Okay. Tell me where he is and I'll find a way to reach him so I can break it."

"How would she know where the staff is?"

Grant pulled the phone from his ear and put it on speaker. “Because,” the woman said, “these assholes do love to know what’s going on in their town. There are cameras everywhere. I’m watching more of those assholes making more wolves as we’re wasting time talking.”

“Can you tell me where Wieland is?”

“No idea who that is.”

“German shepherd, drugged, probably held in a cell.”

“Oh kid, if I’d known that was who you were looking for, I could have told you where he was before you got into this building.”

#

(so, this raises one question to me. Grant has a phone. Niel took a phone off one fo the guards back in the warehouse. Why doesn’t he have it anymore?)

\* \* \*