

## Chapter One

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“I stay,” Fedor said, looking beaten.

“Fedor, you don’t need to protect them,” Niel said, “and we can use your help.”

“Niet.”

Niel opened his mouth to try again, but the pallas cat’s expression stopped him.

Shila had explained she’d seen Grant captured, and that once they rescued him, he’d be able to use his magic to hide everyone as they escaped. Niel had expressed doubts, but Grant was a master at not getting caught and all the relating concepts. He didn’t point out the kangaroo needed a rescue.

There had been talk with the prisoners, and they’d agreed to wait here until their return.

Now it looked like they’d get an extra protector.

“Feel too much already,” Fedor said. “More pain out there.” His shoulders slumped. “Not brave.”

“It’s okay. We’ll be back as quickly as we can. Then we can get out of here and all go back to our lives. I can’t wait to be back in Minneapolis and at school.”

“Da,” the pallas cat said, but didn’t sound convinced.

Niel joined Wieland by the door. The german shepherd now wore a Nazi uniform and wasn’t happy about it. It was loose since it had been worn by the wolf that was Isamu first, but it would take someone paying attention to notice. Isamu was still unconscious, in Wieland’s old cell, which was the

only one with a door still attached to it.

Niel was still in his janitor's uniform and worried about how they were going to pull off the stunt Shila was working on.

"Okay, the program's ready to run on your phone and your friend," she said in his ear. Isamu had a phone with an earpiece on him, and Shila had taken it over before Niel even knew it was there. She'd instructed him to take it and give his old one to Wieland.

"Why does Wieland have to wear the uniform if you're going to magic one on me?" Niel asked.

She sighed. "Niel, I'm not Grant. I don't get obfuscation the way he does, okay? So making you look like one of the Nazis I think I can manage, but pulling that off on two people, at the same time, while watching everything else that's going on? He's already a dog, so why should I add that headache to the already building migraine?"

"Alright, alright." He wanted to argue that a program was a program, but he'd decided that what she called a program was anything but. She was part of the same faction as Grant, even if she seemed to be doing her magic in a completely different way. After all, she was going to cast an illusion over him while not being anywhere near, and Grant said he couldn't do that.

And unlike Grant, he could see the changes as his clothing turned into a mirror of the uniform Wieland wore.

"You're ugly for a wolf," the German shepherd said.

"That's because I'm a raccoon. Ready?"

"This is not our duty," Wieland stated.

"You can stay here with Fedor."

"So can you."

"We need Grant to get these people out. I'm getting him."

"Then I am going with you."

Niel nodded and stepped out and walked with far more confidence than he felt.

"Now," Shila said, after instructing him on where to turn. "You need to remember that I have no idea if Grant succeeded in breaking the staff."

"Shouldn't you have seen it?" Niel muttered.

"If it had happened in view of a camera, yeah, but all she saw was his form being carried to a room. He hasn't left it yet, so he's still in there."

"Maybe he's dead."

"He was breathing when he was brought in."

Shit, he'd said that aloud. But at least she confirmed he was okay; going in.

"So what I can tell you is that I haven't seen anyone with the staff since I saw Grant and that nothing being said confirms it one way or another. Whatever the room they brought it used to be for, it doesn't have any TVs, no radios or computer, and the people who might be in it don't have phones or even a smart watch."

"Almost as if they know those can be hacked," Niel whispered, then closed his mouth as they walked by a group of Nazis. They didn't glance at Niel or Wieland, so he didn't glance at them.

"This is the twenty-first century," she replied. "So being hacked is common knowledge. That they made sure to not have anything in there tells me they have more reasons than most to be careful."

“You mean like what if they were Nazis hiding in an Italian city?”

“Can the sarcasm,” she replied.

The door in question was ahead, and the corridor was empty. Niel glanced at Wieland and the german shepherd nodded. They were still doing this.

He really hoped the staff guy wasn't there, since that was the one person Grant had warned him might be able to see through a magical disguise.

Letting out a breath, he opened the door and stepped into the room, taking in as much of it as he could before all hell broke loose.

On a flimsy table in the center of the room was a sheet with shattered bones on it. Three wolves in uniform were turning to look at them while a... what the fuck was the guy holding grant against the wall by the neck? Lupine, definitely. But he had to be over seven feet tall and massed... well with those muscles, and the size of that cock and balls, he had to be well over four hundred pounds. Was that who had held the staff before? If the general and lieutenant had been turned into a near-perfect specimen, and this one was just about godly, what had he been before?

“Why are you interrupting us?” one of the wolves demanded, and Niel was pulled from looking at God Wolf glaring at Grant at the realization he'd understood the speaker.

“Apologies, sir,” Wieland said in German, with a translation in the german shepherd's voice coming over that through the earpiece a fraction of a second later. “We have important news. We were instructed to come at one and tell you.”

The news was genuine, so there was no worry a check would find them out. Shila had intercepted it and misdirected the messenger. Now, the only way someone would know he and Wieland weren't the true messengers was for one of them to walk out and somehow find them. Not impossible, but at this point, Niel couldn't argue with the plays being made. They were the best they had and had to hope the field would be to their advantage.

“Well,” the wolf demanded. “What is that news?”

The one to his left was staring at Wieland as if he was trying to work out who he could be.

“We were told to deliver the message to the esteemed leader.”

“Then move out of the way,” someone ordered from behind Niel and Wieland, and the shepherd jumped, while Niel barely contained the reflex, stepping to the side.

The leader, which Niel could only guess was the leader because of what he'd said, he looked like a more perfect version of the wolf Niel remembered, since he'd been changed, but then again, so did every other wolf in the room, God Wolf aside.

The leader took in the room and demanded. “What happened? How could you let this happen? Look at what the staff made you, and you let that break it?”

God Wolf growled.

Niel noticed that while he was holding Grant by the neck and the kangaroo had his hands on the wrist holding him, he didn't seem to have difficulty breathing.

“Do not growl at me,” the leader snapped. “You are supposed to be the best of us. Just look at you.” He paused. “Why hadn't anyone found him something to cover him with?”

Niel agreed. That package was quite the distraction.

“There hasn't been time,” one of the wolves answered.

“Then make sure it's done as soon as Tilmann has explained himself.”

“Be silent,” God Wolf snarled. There was no way Niel was thinking of someone looking like that as a Tilmann.

“Do not order me,” the leader snapped. “I am the one who gives orders not—”

“Kneel,” God Wolf ordered, and the leader, along with the three other wolves, dropped to their knees. Niel was still processing that when Wieland pulled him down, too. The only one who reacted was Grant, and Niel was sure it was because the raccoon had attracted his attention already with all the looking in his direction he’d done. Then he realized he also looked like a wolf, so he should have taken a knee too.

Had Wieland been affected too, or was he more on the ball than Niel was?

“Why can’t you just all shut up,” God Wolf said. And Niel shared a confused look. “How?” he demanded of Grant. “How do you get them to be quiet?”

The kangaroo looked confused and God Wolf smiled to himself. “Quiet,” he said in heavily accented English. “I want quiet. Too many of them. Yours are quiet, I can tell. Tell me how to make them quiet so I can hear who I am.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t lie,” God Wolf said, and Niel thought there was pleading in the tone.

“Tilmann,” the leader said in a syrupy voice, shaking himself and getting to his feet. “You are Tilmann. You are my most trusted adviser. You offered yourself to take the mantle of the holder of the staff. I trusted you with it and—”

“Lies,” God Wolf snarled, never taking his eyes off Grant. “There’s no Tilmann in here. I’m not Tilmann. I’m not yours.” The lips pulled into a scary smile. “You’re mine.”

“We are,” one of the wolves said. “You are our god.”

God Wolf straightened. “I am a god.”

“No,” the leader said, “I am in charge. I pulled us together so—”

“Don’t listen to him,” the wolf said. “You pulled us. Your power called to all of us from where you were kept. You made us want to free you so that you could rule us once again.”

“What are you doing?” the leader demanded.

“Showing my allegiance to our true leader. The only one to ever deserve our obedience.”

Whatever the wolf was doing, it worked. God Wolf smiled to himself. “One knows the truth. We all agree on this. I lead.”

“No,” the leader stated, “I—”

“Kneel.”

The leader dropped to his knees with a gasp of surprise.

“Godly Leader,” the wolf said. “Any and all loyal to your glory will obey, but let me also provide you wisdom.”

“Speak.”

“The one you hold is dangerous. You must end him while he is at your mercy. He can—”

“No.”

“Most powerful of Leaders, don’t let—”

“No.”

“But, he’s going to—”

“Silence.”

The wolf tried to speak, but no words came out of his mouth. He looked more annoyed than afraid.

“If only silencing the others was that easy. You will tell me how you accomplished it. Don’t worry about those like him. He’s only afraid of what we are. If he wasn’t mine, he’d want my death too, but I know what you are. And I will not allow an equal to be hurt or killed. You—Oh be silent too.” God Wolf rubbed his temple. “He is like us. You’d be able to tell if you weren’t so narrow-minded.” He snorted. “Get up with the times.”

“Maybe you can let go of me, then?” Grant said. “I mean, if we’re the same and all that.”

“Don’t,” the previously silent wolf said. “You can’t trust him.”

“We’re the same. You can trust yourself, right?” Grant asked.

The wolf groaned. “Don’t listen to him.”

There was something in the way he spoke that nagged at Niel.

“Come on, we’re buddies. I’ll tell you everything I know about the voices and how to silence them.”

“Yes,” God Wolf whispered. “I agree. He’s lying.”

“Come on, you know—” Grant gasped as the hand tightened around his neck.

“You have been the only one for too long,” God Wolf said. “You don’t understand that you can’t fool me any more than I can fool you. You will help me, you’ll see. Until then, you will remain by my said.”

“A Prison,” the wolf said. “Supreme Godly Leader, one like him has to be imprisoned. Put in irons and made silent, lest he turn those loyal to you to his cause.”

“Would you try to turn mine against me?” God Wolf asked Grant, tone gentle, almost as if was speaking to an old friend. Was he caressing Grant’s cheek with a thumb? He wasn’t hard or anything, so whatever was going on wasn’t sexual. God Wolf let out a defeated sigh. “Yes, he wants what is ours. Seeing us, telling him he is no longer alone, isn’t enough.”

“Yes, Godly leader. That is the wise path. I can—”

“We’ll take him,” Niel blurted out. And the wolf he’d interrupted was the only one to react. He stared at Niel as if he couldn’t believe he was there.

“You will treat him with the care you would me,” God Wolf said, now turning and looking in their direction, frowning as his gaze fell on Wieland. “You haven’t received my blessing.”

The shepherd looked God Wolf up and down. “I want to, believe me, but maybe—”

God Wolf’s growls stopped him. His eyes were on Niel, teeth bared. The hatred and anger in those eyes froze the raccoon in place. He was going to die. That divine being was going to rip him apart and eat him.

God wolf took a step in his direction, and the floor shook hard enough the giant of a wolf staggered.

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