

## Chapter One

“Niel?” the kangaroo demanded. “What are you doing here?” the truck jerked into motion and Grant had to drop his arm to grab hold of a crate to keep from falling. “You need to get off.”

“You going to help?” Niel replied, grinning.

“I’ll happily throw you out.” Grant reached for him, but another bump had him be the one to nearly fall out. Niel grabbed him and pulled him in.

“I think we both need to be seated and inside the truck. Maybe you didn’t notice being teleported in, but we’re in the mountains and if this is anything like the path I had to walk to get up here, there’s going to be a deadly drop. With’s with the glitter pompom?”

The kangaroo looked at the things he held. “Principle of attracting attention. Being flashy. This was the truck I got in, so I had to make sure one of them pick it for their getaway.” He thought about something. “Might be why you got in, too. I didn’t have the time to be too selective in making it.”

“I got in this one because I saw the Nazis getting in.”

Grant put the bundle in his pocket. “Why are you here, Niel? This was about rescuing you. Roland’s going to worry.”

“He’s having sex. It’s going to be awhile until he notices I’m not there.”

“Why are you here, Niel?” the kangaroo repeated, this time putting an edge to his tone. Niel nearly dismissed it. Coach Horgar was why more threatening, but Grant had magic on his side. If he really wanted to, he could probably force him to leave.

“A similar reason to you, I’m guessing.”

“You need to make sure one of the most powerful staff ever created doesn’t remain in the hands of Neo-Nazi fanatics?”

“Jarod said it couldn’t do that much damage.”

“Oh sure, if you define damage by the physical destruction of property, the staff of Storger is basically harmless.”

Niel waited the kangaroo out.

(I don't think it's ever established how much Grant knows about the staff in the outline. Unless he knows the chamber has infiltrated the Nazis, I think he needs some form of knowledge to justify his actions. I'm not making what he knows precise. Just enough so he can fear what Nazis can do with it) "Storger was, according to legends, a shaman of a tribe hidden in the Himalayan mountains. Mostly canines. When they fell under attack by a rival tribe, she made a deal with a spirit and was granted a staff with the power to ensure they would always win against anyone rising against them."

"They don't exist anymore," Niel pointed out.

"Even magic has limits, but based on the stories I've been able to find, after that deal, they ruled this region undisputed. Enough, they were able to amass the workforce to make that city inside the mountain. The only other time it happened was Egypt and the pyramids."

"The Mayan," Niel said. "Probably Stonehenge too, although it's a smaller scale. The Romans were known for their workforce and pretty much all voluntary, until the decline. You have the Greeks—what? I'm into history. I'm just pointing out that you might be blowing what they did out of proportion. It's impressive, but not unheard of."

"Fine, it doesn't change the fact the staff made them into an unstoppable force until, probably, stronger magic got involved."

Niel nodded. "So that spirit, it's the universe?"

The kangaroo shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe she made the staff. More likely someone gave it to her, less likely, but still more than her making it is that she found it. This dates back to the eighth or ninth century. There aren't a lot of written records left, and about a remote place like this, even less. Legends and folklore are all I've had to go on."

"So what does the staff do to make an entire group unstoppable?"

"That, I don't know. They already looked pretty damned imposing, from those statues. The stories always say Storger made it happen. Her desire, her wishes, her need. But none go into specifics." Niel digested that in silence. "How about you tell me why you're in here when your best friend pretty much mobilized the Society to find and rescue you?"

Niel groaned, feeling horrible for running off now. "Please tell me you're exaggerating." He could see Roland ruffling a lot of furs to get his way. Determination had been a large part of what made him a force to be reckoned with on the football field.

"Only a little, but you're still not answering me."

"Three of the five of us are still unaccounted for, two of which I know for a fact the Nazis have prisoner. The people back there seem to have forgotten about them in their hurry to fuck."

"Cut them some slack, Niel. Anyone who had a power that could help us volunteered and used that power in the process of getting in there and you rescued. If they're having sex right now, it's about making sure they have the energy for what they're planning next, not celebrating."

"Speaking of energy," Niel said.

"You aren't powered the same way they are," Grant replied.

"Yeah, but it's been more than a day since the last time I've had sex. They kept us in separate cells. I'm getting 'hungry' and by the time this truck gets to its destination, I might be incapacitated."

Grant rested his head back. "Well, that isn't the worse way to kill a few hours."

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Even a few hours was more than how long they were on the road, and out of boredom, Niel explored the truck's content. Beyond the crates closer to the back were boxes of clothing, canned goods, beddings, and enough gym equipment to fill at least one room.

It left him feeling like they'd taken the junk truck, and when he pointed that out to Grant, the kangaroo replied that the driver had picked the truck because he'd influenced the decision, not because of its contents. Niel hoped that was true because he wasn't sure how he'd explain to anyone asking how his rescue had failed because he'd ended up in a truck going to a different city.

The fact he was sure they weren't going back the way Niel had walked to reach the caverns only added to his worry.

His dad was going to get over their current uneasiness and ground Niel until he had his doctorate, or maybe even until he'd gotten tenure.

The truck started winding more down with the sun rising, and a few hours later they were on actual roads, instead of what had felt like trekking paths doing double duties as vehicle ways.

When they started seeing signs in the opposite direction, Niel couldn't read them.

"Italian," Grant said, musing.

Did Italy and Switzerland touch? Geography wasn't Niel's thing. They eventually left the main road again, then those roads in what felt to Niel like an attempt at avoiding driving through any of the towns he saw from the back. When they finally entered one, instead of Italian, the writing he saw was German. Had they driven back around and reached the outskirts of Germany?

Then the truck entered a warehouse and parked next to others.

"Do you understand German?" Niel whispered to Grant and got a shake of the head in return.

He listened to the conversation as the driver and passenger hurried to exit. "Something about to happen," he told the kangaroo. "They didn't say what, but they're determined not to miss it."

"It's got to be the staff," Grant replied. "After the defeat we handed them. They're going to want to use it to make themselves unbeatable." He looked outside.

"You think the others will be there too?"

"No idea, but I doubt they'll be far. They weren't expected to be attacked, so it isn't like they're going to have had a base to retreat to." He jumped out and Niel followed. They snuck around the other trucks, and when Niel glanced in them, he only saw what he thought were the remnants of an encampment.

Grant stopped him and indicated the two canines next to a truck. They were fidgety and the little Niel made out of their conversation revolved around the bad luck of drawing the short straw and missing the big event.

Grant gave a signal and ran at them. Niel followed and tackled the other one.

"English?" Grant asked once they were tied up.

The bloodhound spat in the kangaroo's face while the dachshund remained stoic. Niel went through their pockets while Grant tried again to get them to talk. The few words they said in German to him they understood English, as they were snide-mocking based on what Grant said, but it was nothing useful. They seemed to better than to assume neither of them understood German.

"Yes!" Niel exclaimed as he pulled a phone from the dachshund's pocket. "Double yes!" As the screen saver vanished with a swipe and no demand for a password. He brought up the messaging app and skimmed through them, looking for 'wichtig' or 'versammeln'. What else could have been used?

Treffen.

“Got it.” He reread the message, slower, ignoring the kangaroo’s inquisitive gaze and the glare the dachshund gave him. “Okay, they’re to meet at the Herstellung Schunemann. Are you sure we’re in Italy?” he asked as he brought up the mapping app and had it zoom on their location. Once he zoomed out to see the whole town, some buildings had names over them. The one he was looking for was one of them. “It’s taking place in a factory on the other side of town.”

“Good, let’s go.”

“Grant,” He called as the kangaroo hurried away, “we have a problem.”

“Which is?” he motioned for Niel to follow him.

Reluctantly, he did. “There’s no way you can get in there. If I put on one of their uniforms and stay in the shadows, I might be able to pass for a dog, but you? One look at your tail and we’re joining Wieland and Fedor wherever they’re being held.”

The kangaroo smiled. “Oh, no worry about that. I got what I needed from them so we’ll be able to walk in. But since you have a phone, do me a favor. There’s someone I need you to call.

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