

Chapter One

“A week,” Niel said, trying not to make it a grumble.

“It’s not going to be that bad,” Olavo said. “I’ll even pay for a first class seat for you.”

“Why not use the jet?” he looked for Roland, but he’d run off. Great, abandoned by his best friend when he could really use someone to talk with. Fuck. Why couldn’t things just line up for once?

“The jet isn’t mine, and my father only lets me use it to go home.”

“Right.”

“What’s wrong?” Olavo asked.

“Nothing,” Niel replied.

“Niel, I know you well enough to know when something’s bothering you.”

“It’s just this whole thing. Only a few days ago I find out my father’s not my father. At the same time as I find out I’m part of your faction. And now that I know where my father is, I have to wait until next weekend to go see him because I can’t miss classes.”

“I can arrange for you to have a flight today. That should put you in France at some point tomorrow. If you leave the next day, that has you back in Minneapolis by the middle of the week. Do you really have anything you can’t miss?”

“I have a test Tuesday morning. That’s about the only thing. Coach still thinks I’m out with whatever put me in the hospital and I can probably use the fact his little hazing to blame to keep him from being pissed at me when he finds out I wasn’t back at practice the instant I felt better.” Niel sighed. “It’s just this entire thing. I know it’s stupid for me to be impatient, but I want to speak with my biological father, at least find out why he never contacted me. Dad never forbid him or anything. I just want this deal with now.”

“Maybe having to wait is a good thing,” the copybara said. “You don’t sound like you even know how to feel. Take a few weeks to consider things.”

“Fuck that,” Roland said, returning with a confused Thomas. “Why wait when you have instant

transportation right here?"

"Do you need to head home now?"

"France," Roland said, which seemed to confuse Thomas more.

Niel came him a rundown of his situation.

"So, you can get him there," Roland said, "he talks with the guy and then you take him home and he's going to end up there before Olavo."

Thomas sighed. "Roland, do you have any idea how big France is? I have two landing spots there. Just getting Niel to his father from there could take longer than him flying there."

"Where does that man live?" Roland asked.

Niel looked at Olavo who consulted the file his father sent.

"It's an address in Boiseuil," the capybara answered, then he was reading something.

"That sounds familiar," Roland said.

Thomas nodded. "Can you google it, Olavo? My phone is in my pants which are somewhere in this house. I think the last time I saw them was two days ago."

The capybara projected the map over his phone. "That's Boiseuil," he pointed a highlighted dot.

Thomas cursed. "And that's where Victor's living." He pointed at another dot nearly touching Boiseuil this zoomed out. "Just outside Poulenat. Boiseuil is where he goes to do his grocery shopping."

Niel looked at he map in disbelief. "And I'm guessing one of those landing spot is at your brother's house. That's quite the coincidence."

"Next to it," Thomas said. "And it has to be, because there is no way He can have a hand in this. Vic lives in a Practitioner safehouse."

"What's a Practitioner?" Niel asked when no one elaborated.

"Oh, just wait until you met Grant," Roland said with a grin before running off. "I'm going to see of Mom and Dad want in on visiting Vic!"

"Please don't let him have super speed," Thomas implored. "He's already impossible to keep track of."

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"When you said next to it," Niel said, looking around at the bales of hay and farm equipment, "I was expecting a guest house or something. Not a barn."

"Vic isn't comfortable with having Thomas just appear in his house," Roland said. Thomas nodded. "You need a recharge?"

"I'll be good," Thomas answered, sounding out of breath. "Just don't ask me to teleport until after I've had sex." He headed for the small door in the larger double door.

Stepping outside, Niel was surprise to see the sun close to the horizon on the east, so morning. He was going to be multiple jet lagged at this point. Were they still Sunday? Where was the international date line? The other surprising thing was the farm house the two rats were heading for and the large field of grapes vanishing in the distance.

He whistled in astonishment. Victor lived here?

He rejoined Thomas and Roland halfway to the house and just as woman exited it, along with a badger.

"Hey Jacques!" Niel called out. He was another of the frat brother the bat had given a passing

history between Niel and him. They wouldn't be friends, but they were more than acquaintances.

"Thomas!" the badger exclaimed, then ran at them, hugging the two rats. The other rat trailed behind him, a smile on her face. Jacques offered Niel his hand. "Niel. I'm glad to see you, although the circumstances aren't great. Your ride to Boisseuil should be here in an hour or so."

Niel nodded. "They could be worse. I could have half of you running around the country trying to catch me."

"I will never live this down, will I?" Thomas said before hugging the woman. "How's Victor doing today?"

"It's one of his better days, although he'd letting the twins distract him from your arrival." She offered her hand. "Hello Niel, I don't know if you remember me, I'm Orinda Hertz."

He shook it. "Victor's wife, I remember you from a few of the thanksgivings."

"I need you to be careful around Victor, after what happened to him, he isn't comfortable around men he doesn't know, especially not Society men."

"I'm not—" Niel started, but cut his explanation of how he wasn't the same sort. What did it matter? Whatever had happened to Victor had been traumatic enough to cause that. It wasn't his place to make himself an exception.

She led them inside. The door opened to a large kitchen and eating area, with the living room visible where another rat and a collie were trying to round up two kids.

"Wow, they've grown," Niel said. The last time he'd seen the twins at a thanksgiving gathering, they were still on all fours. His voice caught the attention of the children who ran toward them. The collie followed them with the rat behind him, but wary.

"Niel, good to see you again," Hubert said. Like Jacques, he was someone the bat had put in Niel's memories. Just enough they weren't strangers.

"Hi Vic," Thomas greeted his brother cautiously.

The older brother startled at being addressed. "Hi, Thomas."

"This is Niel," Orinda said. "Stewart's son."

"He's one of them." Victor looked about ready to run, or pass out.

"Breathe, honey. Remember to breathe. Nothing's going to happen. Jacques and Hubert are here. You're safe."

Niel looked at Tomas. What the fuck had happened to Victor? He didn't remember the man being an action hero of anything, but he certainly didn't have anything like this fear at the last gathering. Especially not when it was Thomas and Roland who seemed to set him on edge more than Niel.

"I know. It's just... I'm sorry Roland, I know it was an important day for you, but..." Victor started shaking.

"I get it Vic," Roland answered. "Maybe we should take this outside and let you play with the twins?"

"No, no," Victor hurried to say, although it sounded forced. "You're family. I'm not going to kick you out."

Orinda ushered the twins away from Niel. "Come on you two, why don't you take daddy to the living room and play with him."

Niel opened his mouth to ask, but Jacques shook his head.

"How are things back home?" Thomas asked Hubert, heading for the coffee machine on the

counter. "Any improvements?"

The collie rolled his eyes. "Things are never going to change while that curmudgeon is in charge. He has his head so fucking deep in the past all he sees is the mistakes that were made and how they weight our family down, like anyone other than him gives a fuck about it. World war two was a fucking century ago. The whole country paid for what happened then. They learned and move on, my fucking elder should do the same." He paused. "No disrespect intended."

Jacques smacked the back of the collie's head. "No one here cares that you're disrespecting your elder."

"Says the guy living here when his family's only a few hours away." The collie looked at his hand like he was planing on using it.

"No hitting Jacques through the furniture," Orinda warned.

"Can someone open the door for me?" Hubert asked casually.

Niel looked around for a clue as to what was going on. He remembered Hubert being strong, but he couldn't recall what Jacques' power was. No one seemed to take the request seriously so Niel didn't move, only accepting the coffee that was offered.

"And unlike you, my family asked me to be here."

"You know he isn't going to show up, right?" Thomas said. "And even if your family got their hands on him, they only get a limited number of teleports before he's drained."

"I know, and that could have been avoided if you had been willing to work with them, Thomas."

"I don't work with blackmailers," the rat stated.

"Mama," one of the twins called, running toward them. "Papa's not well."

Victor was looking at them, eyes wide and shaking. The other twin was hugging him, but not getting a reaction.

"If you'll excuse me," Orinda said as she stood and joined her husband, helping him to his feet and escorting him up the stairs.

Jacques cursed quietly. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought that up with him within earshot."

"Is it safe to ask what was about?" Niel asked.

Thomas looked at the badger, who sighed.

"When my family found out Victor was staying in France, they tried to use him to play hard ball with Thomas."

"The teleportation thing?" Niel asked.

"Yes. Being the only one means some people will be unreasonable about gaining control of him. My family was such idiots."

"Not all of them," Thomas said.

"Sure, but I didn't exactly try to stop them. Anyway. They kidnapped him. Fortunately for them, they didn't even think of touching him beyond that, but instead of getting Thomas to heel, he went to the Dumier and offered them his services in exchange for their help rescuing his brother."

"That's..." Niel couldn't find the words.

"Just about the stupidest thing anyone could do after what Vic went through at the hands of the Lewistons," Roland said. He'd gotten a plate of cheeses and cold cuts out of the fridge and was eating. Again.

“I’m not even going to ask about that,” Niel said, remember Jacques’ shake of the head and now had an idea what it had been about. “So you’re here because they think you can convince Thomas to change his mind?”

The badger snorted. “I’m here because I’m one of two Mercier Thomas will allow anywhere near his family, and because I helped rescue Victor, he can stand having me around.”

“They’re hoping that Firmin will pop in for a visit instead of Thomas,” Roland said. “Which shows just how stupid they are. After how they treated him, is it any wonder Fir wants nothing to do with them?”

Niel racked his memory trying to pull up anything relevant.

“I was in Minneapolis to keep an eye on him,” Jacques said in a flat tone. “My instructions were to kill him if he did anything to ‘bring shame’ to our family. Henry played with that enough I don’t think I’d have done it no matter what Fir did, but it gives you an idea what my family thinks of him.”

“Just because he’s a shapeshifter, I mean who can copy powers?”

“Historically, body thieves have abused their powers,” Hubert said. “It doesn’t justify how Firmin was treated, but the last one before him nearly started a war in china, so they don’t get a lot of leeway.”

“That’s bullshit,” Thomas said. “They’re just a convenient scapegoat. It’s not like anyone can prove the guy wasn’t actually him since he blew himself up in the attempt. The Society just wanted to be able to claim they weren’t responsible for it. Or are you going to try to convince me that trying to topple governments isn’t something the society did, even back then?”

The discussion turned too intense for him. The historical aspects was interesting, but Jacques and Hubert were strongly on one side and Thomas equally on the other. This wasn’t about exploring opinion, but hammering yours onto the other. He looked to Roland, who had a new plate in his hand, but the rat shrugged.

Niel stood and only Roland noticed. He left them to their argument and decided to walk around until his ride arrived. There were a few other rooms on the ground floor—He wasn’t going up, not with Victor there and the fragile state he was in. A small guest room, an office and stairs leading down into a cellar. That made sense, with the grapes being grown. The winery proper was probably elsewhere on the property.

Racks of wines lined one wall, with the occasional large barrel between them. Those had a name, butts, maybe? The whole basement seemed to be a wine cellar and after the second turn he considered going back up, but noticed that the front of one of those butts was opened as if it was a door.

Was there really a secret door in the safe house where Roland’s brother was staying? He should probably walk away, he thought as he approached it. Whoever was responsible for it wouldn’t want him looking inside.

Then again, if they were serious about it remaining a secret, they shouldn’t have left it open.

Inside, the room was the size of a decent bedroom and before Niel noticed anything else, the sword floating in the middle of it, had all his attention.

It was a plain iron sword as far as he could tell. Other than pictures in history books, he knew little about them. The handle looked to be leather, the guard straight and plain.

And it was floating there, handle up, point down. It had to be a trick, right?

Of course not. Magic was a thing, so it could be that. Probably was. Was it suspended or encased?

He reached for it, considering pushing it as a test.

“I wouldn’t touch it, if I were you.”

Niel jumps up and away from the sword, tuning to face the kangaroo standing in the doorway with an amused smile on his muzzle.

“Why?” Niel asked, trying to force his heard back in place.

“Staves, which that is, even if it looks like a sword, don’t react well to anyone who’s been claimed by a god.” He stepped in and started to close the front of the barrel. He stopped. “Is one of the twins in here? I swear neither of them are initiated and it’s like they already have the power to find what you don’t want found.”

“I think that’s called being a kid.” Niel looked around, taking in the room fully. Other than the sword, there was nothing there. The walls were packed dirt, as was the ground. There were indications there might have been furniture at some point, but those had been taken away.

The door closed and Niel realized he was in a room with a stranger who called a sword a staff. Maybe he should rethink his situation.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you. I wasn’t looking for you, but it’s good I have found you.” He offered his hand. “Grant, Grant Summer.”

Niel hesitated before taking it. “Niel Leslie. How do you know I’ve been claimed by a god?” did he have a sign anyone who knew how this worked could see?

“Thomas asked me what I knew about your situation—he’s always asking me about magical stuff. It’s like he thinks I’m some encyclopedia or something. But in this case I do know a little, so if you have questions, I might have answers.”

Niel remembered why the name sounded familiar. “What a Practitioner?”

The question seemed to take the kangaroo by surprise. “Okay, not where I thought this was going, and I don’t think you’re ready for the in depth answer, so here goes. For what matters to you, you can think of us as another faction. We have our magic, just like you have yours. Unlike sex, ours is in part channeled through our staff. Our version of your sigils and phrases is talismans that we make.”

Niel nodded. “So is this your staff then?”

Grant stammered. “No, I’d never even try to claim that.” He looked at the sword. “That’s...” he chuckled. “Even if I could take it, I an nowhere near worthy enough.”

“So where is it?”

“Err, it’s... I mean...”

The man’s reaction had Niel feeling like he’d asked him to exposed his most embarrassing secret. Before he could tell him he didn’t have to answer. The door opened and Jacques looked in.

“At least you two are dressed.” He looked at the sword and then away as if he didn’t want to admit it was there. “You’re ride’s here.” The badger smirked. “You ready to go see your daddy?”

Niel glared and reached for the sword. “If I take that thing and stab you through with it, are you going to survive?”

Grant was before him and holding his hand. “I told you not to touch it. *You* might not survive the attempt.”

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