

Chapter One

Niel swiped his phone over the scanner and pulled the door open. Tried to. “Fuck,” he grumbled. He was too tired to deal with a scanner on the fritz tonight. He considered himself lucky to have made it from the bus to the dorm as tired as he was.

He’d spent most of the second half benched, but not because of what he’d told the coach. Niel was good enough he’d been needed on the field, but after the third tackle he’d had trouble getting up and he stumbled getting back to the lineup. A paramedic had pulled him out of play to check him over and had had him sit for a while. Niel ate a couple of energy bars in the meantime, since he hadn’t gotten anything during halftime and was regretting it. He did another play but had been tackled hard, and his head swam for the rest of the game.

The trip back hadn’t been restful, with the team celebrating the victory and not caring that he was tired. By the time they’d reached the university dorms, everyone was quiet, but Niel had been working just as he’d finally fallen asleep to walk through the cold night to his room.

And now, the damned door didn’t want to unlock.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Brenden whispered from three doors down.

“Trying to unlock our door.” Niel felt like kicking the thing. Maybe punching the scanner would help.

“Well, stop it, that’s Carmichael’s room, and he is going to kill you if you wake him.”

Niel turn to roll his eyes at the cougar, but Brenden had the door open and motioned for Niel to get in. He decided he was too tired to argue. If there was a bed there, he was falling into it and hoping for unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Niel rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the whiteboard where the list of passages the professor had been talking about was written. He had been certain he’d set up the links ahead of time, but he couldn’t find them. Fortunately, Professor Rogers understood students weren’t always on the

ball, so he always had the relevant information on the board for them to search and access from their phones.

Only Niel had trouble getting his eyes to focus.

He'd slept, or at least been unconscious, and since there was never practice after a game night, he'd been able to sleep until nine, not that it had helped. Getting showered and dressed had taken twice as long, and even knowing he might be late for his class hadn't been enough to get him to hurry. Or rather, he'd wanted to, but his body wasn't cooperating.

Fuck, he hoped he wasn't coming down with something.

* * * * *

It was a good thing he wasn't being charged by the plate, Niel thought as he put the tray down on the table. His head had cleared slightly, his body didn't feel like it was packed into so much cotton, but he was ravenous.

"You going for some weight gain contest?" Jessica asked. She was in his Ancient French and Russian History class, which meant that on Wednesday they ate together, since one was before lunch and the other after.

"Just feeding the flu."

"You starve the flu, and feed a cold," the lioness responded.

"You sure?"

"You're a history buff, don't you know your sayings?"

"I'm a football player, we don't know anything."

"You certainly get hit on the head often enough to justify that one. That last tackle was pretty hard last night."

He nodded. His position didn't get the ball often, but once in a while, things lined up, as they had at the last game, and he'd intercepted a pass, only for the other team to take him down hard. It had given his team the ball but taken him out for the rest of the game.

Maybe that was what was wrong with him? The paramedic had cleared him, but maybe this was a delayed concussion? Was that a thing?

It was probably just the flu.

"Earth to Niel, you still with me?"

"Uh? Yeah, I am. Sorry. You were saying?"

"That you got hit hard. Did anyone make sure you were okay? Maybe you should go to the infirmary?"

"I'll be fine. I'll go to bed after the class." He started on the demolishing of his tray filled with enough food for the three people he felt his stomach was demanding he eat.

* * * * *

Niel shouldered the stall door open to the loud gurgling of his intestines, then barely had his pants down and was sitting before they emptied themselves painfully.

Fuck.

Wasn't feeling sick mixed with diarrhea a sign he'd caught food poisoning? Had he eaten anything before the game? He certainly hadn't during or after. He didn't think so, and he couldn't believe he'd caught this from the cafeteria. Food poisoning didn't act this fast, did it?

* * * * *

Niel stared at the text on his phone. It was the reading material assigned for the Russian Monarchy essay he had to hand over next week. Only they looked like blurred squiggles instead of letters.

“You look like shit,” Brenden commented, exiting the bathroom wearing only a towel. He walked stiffly. He too, wasn’t over the punishment he’d received during the game.

“You don’t need glasses. Congratulations,” Niel replied bitterly.

“What did the nurse say you have?”

“Nothing. It’ll pass, I just need to finish this and I’ll go to bed.”

“Dude, you should go to the infirmary.”

“It’s just the flu.” Niel’s stomach gurgled. “Or food poisoning.” He suddenly felt fully away and ran for the bathroom. Good thing his roommate was done. The way his body was behaving, Niel didn’t think he’d made it to the restroom at the end of the hall.

* * * * *

He never wanted to see that again. He decided, returning to his desk. He wasn’t in the habit of looking at what was in the bowl once he was done, but he was pretty sure it should all be brown, not... those colors.

“You heading out?” he asked the cougar, who was dressing.

“Yeah. Melany wants to meet up. I’m not inviting you. I don’t want you to give her whatever you have.”

“Then I hope I haven’t given it to you. Can you bring me back a sandwich when you come back?”

“Dude, how are you hungry if you’re sick?”

Niel shrugged.

“I’ll stop by the cafeteria and bring you one. It’ll be a few hours.”

“I’ll survive.” He hoped.

* * * * *

“I can’t, sorry. I have an essay to finish, and I’ve caught a bug while in Madison. Sex is the surest way to pass that on to you, and you haven’t pissed me off, Luke.”

“That sucks. I really wanted to explore Ancient Rome some more,” the ram replied.

“Ancient Rome isn’t going anywhere. I’ll show you more about it in a day or two. But thanks for the offer.”

He disconnected and placed another call. Why hadn’t he thought about this earlier? Olavo could fuck him to full health.

“You have reached Olavo Medeiros’s message center. If this is regarding classes, press one, if this is frat business, press two, if you are a friend, press three.” He pressed three. “Hi, I’m unreachable until the end of the day tomorrow. Sorry about that. If it’s something that can’t wait, call Kuno. He can probably help with whatever you need. Otherwise, leave your name and I’ll call you back once I’m in town again.”

Niel put the phone down. Could he bother the margay for a healer over a stomach bug? They probably had more important things to do than help an outsider feel better, regardless of Niel and Kuno’s history, especially since part of that was fabricated.

This would only be a few days. He would survive the misery, if not the coach's reaction, when he didn't play at his best.

* * * * *

How many ways were there to fail? Niel couldn't think of the answer. He couldn't think of much because of the fog in his mind, but he was confident he'd found all of them as they applied to playing football.

He'd tripped over his own feet. Dropped just about every ball that was thrown at him and even Carl, the lightest of the players, had sent him on his ass with a shoulder block.

It was a good thing this was just practice. The coach would kill him if he was this horrible during a—

“Leslie! Get over here!” Coach Horgar yelled.

With a sigh, Niel accepted Carl's hand and got up. He ambled to the bear, taking care not to move too quickly or his head would spin out of his skull.

“Are you okay?” the bear asked, searching Niel's face.

“I'm fine.” He did his best to show his strong side.

“How about you tell me the truth this time? I can see you aren't fine. I think the team in Madison can see it too right now.”

“I think I caught a bug at the game. Maybe the locker room wasn't properly cleaned after their last game or something.”

The bear looked over the field where the others were training in worry before focusing back on Niel. “You think. Are you telling me you haven't gone to the infirmary yet?”

Niel shrugged. “It's just a bug, it'll pass.”

“And before that, you might pass it on to everyone one else.” The bear cursed. “Do you know what that could do to their chances?” He let out a breath. “Go see the nurse, don't argue. You kids and your damned belief you can survive anything. Half the sick time on this team would be avoided if your first reaction was to think you caught the plague and went to the nurse.”

“I'd just be spreading it to her if I did. It's called the plague because there's no cure.”

“It's the twenty-first century. There's a cure for everything, including whatever you have. Go see the nurse.”

Niel headed off the field and dropped the shoulder pads on a bench in the locker room. He'd put it away on his way back, once the nurse told him he'd be fine in a few days and to take it easy until then. When else was she going to do, send him to the hospital for a stomach bug?

* * * * *

Niel opened his eyes slowly to a steady beeping near his ear, and distant conversations, urgent and indistinct. He was lying on a bed. In a room with a machine on his left showing his heart rate. That was where the beeping came from. There were other machines lining the wall, but as he turned to get a look, something pinched on his arm and he stared at the IV connected to it.

He was in a hospital.

What was he doing in a hospital? It wasn't from the game. He'd been woozy, but he'd walked away from that. He'd made it back to the dorms, went to place. Has been off, but made it, then there was training the next morning, fumbling too many balls—man was he in a bad way if that didn't even sound funny as he thought it—then the coach sending him to see the nurse who...

Why didn't he remember reaching the infirmary?

He'd made it to the lockers, left without the shoulder pads, and...

Clearly, he hadn't made it to the infirmary and, however that had happened, had led to him being here. He wished being in the hospital meant he'd feel better, instead of about the same, as well as hungry. Now he wished he'd eaten something before practice instead of worrying about what would happen. His stomach had to have settled now.

He located the call button and pressed it.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and a doctor entered, stethoscope and all, followed by a nurse and Coach Horgar and his father.

"Mister Leslie," the doctor said, and she smiled reassuringly. "I'm glad to see you're away. You have good timing, your father just arrived."

"Is it a bad cliché for me to tell you he's Mister Leslie and I'm just Niel?"

She chuckled. "Fortunately for you, we aren't in a movie, so it doesn't matter. Now, I have a few questions for you before I answer some of your own. When's the last time you ate?"

"Around nine last night, a sandwich, which I regretted a couple of hours later. I think I have a stomach bug. Food's going right through me."

She made notes on her pad. "How long had that been going on?"

"The first time was that afternoon, a couple of hours after lunch. It's why I didn't eat this morning."

"Mister Horgar mentioned you said you might have caught something during your game in Madison. Any reason why you think that?"

"Just guessing. I woke up yesterday feeling off. I thought it was just the after-effect of a hard game, and I was tackled a few times, but then it got worse and after lunch, I figured it had to be a bug and the only place I've been out of the ordinary if in Madison."

"So just to be clear, you're feeling lethargic, you have issues focusing, and you have diarrhea." Niel nodded.

"Alright. We're confirmed you don't have a stomach flu; or any flu. You have bruises, but nothing I wouldn't expect from a teenager or a football player. You don't have a concussion or show signs of having had one recently."

"Recently?" Stewart asked.

"Once the body heals, the only way to determine if someone has had a concussion is through their changes in behavior. What's called Post-Concussion Syndrome. We have specialized scans we can run if we suspect that to be the cause, but at this time, nothing points to that."

"Then what is wrong with my son?"

"I don't know."

"Look, he was admitted after fainting in school and Coach Horgar told the nurse about the rest. Clearly, something is going on with him."

"Yes," she answered, "but Niel was admitted less than two hours ago. We have him on a drip and we took blood that's being studied, but your son is clearly not in danger. So the results might—" the pad beeped. "Be here now." She smiled and read. Her smile dropped. "Okay, this is odd. Niel, you're sure you ate yesterday?"

"Yes, like I said, a lot of it went right through me, but I had lunch, dinner, and a sandwich."

“Your blood sugars’ unusually low, but your insulin’s fine. We’re not seeing the corresponding ketones looking for more glucose.” She looked up. “Alright, this might be nothing more than something going wrong with the test we ran.”

“But,” Stewart pressed.

“But I want to confirm everything before I attempt to assign a condition to your son.”

“Look, clearly you have an opinion,” Coach Horgar said. “So why don’t you just lay it on us. We’re adults, we can take it for what it is, but it’s going to be better than leaving us to come up with worst-case scenario.”

“I’m with the coach.”

Niel stayed silent. She’d said ‘attempt’. She wasn’t even sure that with confirming the tests were right, she’d know what was wrong with him. She looked at him, then took the coach and his father out of the room.

Niel sighed. Maybe he should have said he wanted the guess, too. He didn’t care to be left in the dark.

Although... he lifted the covers and pulled the hospital gown up, then smiled. If nothing else, the trip had caused the damned cage to be removed.

* * *