

Chapter One

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Silence followed the end of the shaking, and Niel was confused as the others in the room as to what had caused it. Then yells sounded in the distance, someone calling to others.

Had Shila called in the cavalry against Grant's wishes?

Then one of the wolves ran out, while the leader gave orders that the wolf who'd been ingratiating himself with God Wolf was trying to contradict the leader and Grant was—

Fuck, they were here to rescue Grant.

Niel grabbed the kangaroo's arm and pulled him out of God Wolf's loose grip. Then the three of them were out of the room.

"Thank God you didn't do what Grant said," Niel said, joining the running wolves.

"Don't thank anyone yet," she replied. "And pass the phone to Grant so I can talk with him."

Niel did and reached to disconnect the earpiece.

"Keep that on," Grant said. "Shila, what's going on? I know you didn't call them in."

"You want the bad news or the worse news, or the really bad news?"

Grant cursed. "Why can't you ever have good news for me? Bad news."

"The Chamber's here. They're the ones attacking."

Niel swallowed. If that was the bad news, how did it get worse? He pulled the kangaroo into a new corridor.

"At least the Nazi will be able to hold them off with the sheer number of them."

"You sure about that? Because not only are they here, but one of them has Joan of Arc's sword."

"Fuck. But that explains why Kingsley ran instead of trying to kill me."

“And there’s the even worse news. Your old friend’s here too.”

Grant stopped and Niel lost his grip, then stopped. Grant had called the mole who’d been part of the attack on the farm by that name, and the history between them was loud.

“Grant,” Niel said as the kangaroo looked in the opposite direction of where he needed him to come. “There’s more important things to do than some personal fight.”

“You don’t understand the number of people Kingsley’s destroyed, Niel.”

“You’re right, but there’s something like two hundred prisoners who need to get out of here unharmed. I think that’s more important.”

“Shila, what do they have?” the kangaroo asked, eyes closed.

“Along with the sword and Kingsley’s magnetic staff, I see a dozen more, two of which are staying close by the sword, so I think those will be emotional boosters of some sort. I can tell you there’s one of protection, one of fire. Neither side seems to care for who gets hurt in the crossfire. And there she goes. And it’s as bad as the stories say. She just turned half the nazis to her side.”

“Who?” Niel asked. “How?”

“Joan of Arc’s staff’s concept is freedom,” Shila said when Grant remained silent. “But that’s as nebulous as it gets, so in the end, it’s about conviction. Put that in the hands of someone who believes enough and you can move armies. Those armies don’t have to be your own. And whoever that woman is, she believes.”

“How the fuck did they get here so quickly?” Grant asked.

“I’m not a crystal ball, and unless you want me to drop everything I’m doing right now, I don’t have the time to get you that answer. Quick guesses are a mole or a teleportation staff.”

“No fucking way they have one of those,” Grand said. “Only a few years ago, *we* didn’t believe it was a possible concept. And we pride ourselves in thinking outside the box. The Chamber had to have someone in their ranks keeping them appraised of what the Nazis were up to.”

(and what follows is what I will have to retcon in draft 2) “The dalmatian,” Niel said, as the way the wolf spoke finally made sense. “Back in Minneapolis, there was the dalmatian with a slight German accent who approached me a few times to meet a friend of his. And he made sure I knew about the party the frat was throwing, not that I needed him to tell me about it. That’s where I had sex with Fedor, who was only there because his friend, a dalmatian with a slight German accent, had raved about those parties. Afterward, after my hospital stay and finding out what was up with me, he showed up again, and now that I think back on it, he implied pretty hard he knew what was going on with me and that he could help me out. He was also one of the people part of the kidnapper’s crew. He’s the wolf who was trying to convince God Wolf—that’s how I think of him, okay?—to have you killed.”

“Okay,” Grant said, looking like he had trouble taking it all in. “Okay. I don’t like the implications that raise, but that just means I have to stop them.”

“Which you can do after the prisoners are safely out of here,” Niel insisted.

“About that,” Shila said, and Niel shoulder’s sagged.

“Now what?”

“The explosion gave them an excuse not to wait for you to come back. Fedor’s the only one waiting for you there. Looks like he could use a pep talk, too.”

Niel cursed. Would any of them make it out, or would they get pulled into the battle? He didn’t remember much about Joan of Arc, only that she’d been able to inspire people to rise against their

oppressors. If the sword pushed the freedom buttons, the prisoners were going to be easy targets for it.

“We need to get Fedor,” Niel said.

“You do that,” Grant replied. “I’m going to go put an end to Kingsley.”

“You and what army?” Wieland asked.

“The kid’s right,” Shila said. “You have two literal armies out there duking it out. You really want to get in the middle of that?”

Grant patted his pockets. “It’s the perfect opportunity. He’s going to be distracted and—”

“It’s Kingsley,” she spat. “The man doesn’t know the meaning of the word. I’m going to give you my opinion, whether you want it or not. He isn’t here for whatever the rest of the Chamber’s here for. He’s here because he knew that you wouldn’t be able to stay away. I’m not going to go so far as to say all this was engineered to get to you, but he definitely is taking advantage of it. The best thing you can do if you want to hurt him and get out of here and make the rendez-vous with your extraction.”

Grant glared at the phone.

“I wish someone would tell me what’s going on,” Wieland said. “You two might have forgotten, but I don’t hear what’s being said.”

“There’s a rescue on the way,” Niel said before Grant could take this in another direction, “but we need to meet up with them. The prisoners have escaped in the confusion of one group of bad people attacking another group of bad people, so all we have to do is get Fedor and leave.”

“Leaving a bunch of civilians at the mercy of the Chamber and Nazis,” Grant said.

Niel folded under that intercept.

“Who you were more than willing to not care about, Grant Summer,” Shila countered with, “until it served your goals. You’re in the middle of a battlefield. Hate to say it, roo, but you need to think about your survival instead of committing suicide.”

She was right. As wrong as it felt, Niel grabbed onto that. Anything other than leaving meant they’d be dead. “Shila, how about I tell Wieland to knock Grant out and we carry him?”

“Don’t,” the kangaroo warned the german shepherd, hand reaching in a pocket.

Shila sighed. “You need him conscious and willing. Your life, Wieland’s life, and Fedor’s life are in his hands. I don’t have the power and know-how to mask the three of you.”

“That’s a low blow, Shila,” Grant replied, looking from Wieland to Niel.

“Hey, I tried being reasonable.”

“Let’s get the other,” Grant said, “and then I’ll take you to where we need to go.”

“Up,” Shila said. “You need to go up.”

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Fedor still looked like he’d been whipped as they hurried up the stairs to the roof. It didn’t matter how many times Niel said he wasn’t to blame for the prisoners running on their own, the pallas cat was taking his inability to keep them there hard.

They passed wolfs and other canines who didn’t glance their ways due to the magic Grant had over them. Instead of an illusion that each of them was a Nazi wolf, he’d made use of the general chaos to create what he referred to as an aversion field around them. They were something no one wanted to look at, so they didn’t.

The roof showed signs of fighting, but, fortunately, no bodies or blood. Maybe the people they’d encountered had been up here and rallied by the call of the... fake Joan of Arc? Shila had her

own thing around them so they wouldn't fall under its sway.

From the roof, they had a horrible view of the fighting. Wolves against wolves, staves against machine guns, and explosions could have been grenades of another staff.

"One thing I don't get," Niel said, pulling away so he wouldn't see the carnage anymore. "Is why they're still here? You broke the staff. Unless I'm wrong about that wolf being the dalmatian working for them, they know there's nothing here for them anymore."

"If you're right, then they know there's something here for them," Grant said unhappily. "The one you call God Wolf... I think he's the staff now."

"Can that happen?" Niel asked. Wieland looked confused and Fedor was sitting to the side, not paying them any attention.

"No," Shila replied.

"There is no proof it can't be done, Shila," Grant said. "Even with magic, you can't prove a negative. He controlled those wolves. Even the Chamber one reacted with what he was told to do, and I could see him fight it. I wasn't surprised when he couldn't prevent him since someone mundane wouldn't be able to hold up against that power, but if he's Chamber, that's even more impressive."

"Okay, how?"

"That... I don't know. He was still holding it when I broke it. It's the first time that's happened. So maybe? I don't know, maybe the power transferred at that moment? How do you expect me to know, Shila?" he demanded in exasperation. "I don't even know how I do what I'm doing."

Niel looked over the edge at the battle, then at the sky. "Shila, any idea when that rescue's going to be here? It's looking like the Chamber's got this and we aren't going to be safe once they've taken control."

"I lost track of him when he ended up too far of anything with a signal, but he's making good time. He'll be there before anything much happens."

The howl made Niel's blood freeze; he was amazed he didn't piss himself. It was a predator, the predator of predators, and it was after him. It would get him. There was no avoiding that. He was dead; it wasn't even worth running. All that would do was make it hungrier and then it wasn't just him, it would devour, but—

It was just a howl.

Next to him, Grant was panting, holding something that looked like a Dreamcatcher. Or at least a net between sticks.

"What the fuck was that?" the kangaroo. Like Niel, he was still shaking.

"Fuck if I know," Shila replied. "With the disruption I have around the lot of you, that shouldn't have affected you."

"I think we've all underestimated what the Staff of Storger is capable of."

Niel looked over the parapet. There was a pause in the fighting as confusion re3ign. The woman holding the sword was screaming orders and God Wolf, dressed in a mix between a Nazi uniform and medieval armor, was yelling his own orders. Between the two, lines were slowly forming, and Niel could tell who God Wolf had better control of. Those who had been changed by the staff, as more wolves stepped to his side and the rest to the Chamber's. It might be equal, it might be more in favor of one or the other. Niel couldn't tell.

At least, his attention was on the battlefield and not—

God Wolf looked up at Niel.

Why did he keep doing that to himself?

“Grant,” Niel started, intending to give a warning, but God Wolf leaped in their direction.

Of fuck. They were so screwed.

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