

## Chapter One

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The dean of the University of Minnesota was an older buck who stood tall and dignified. Niel had never interacted with him, until now, but he'd seen him speak back on his first day, in the auditorium and had been close enough to see him.

Standing in the same office as the man, after he had been confronted with irrefutable proof magic was real, had shattered a lot of that confident exterior the man had carried on that day. Most of that was now in the body language of the other older gentleman in the office; the Margay who lead the Richard family, Morgan Richard (I don't believe the elder has ever been named, but if you have a better name for him, feel free to change it).

Magic was difficult to deny when the man before you created lightning around his hands strong enough every piece of electronic in the office had reacted to it. Niel figured it was a mark of his control over it that nothing had been fried.

The buck swallowed and cast a glance at Niel and Fedor. "Do they..." he trailed off.

"No," Morgan said. "They can't do what I can, and if they could, they'd know better than to do so. But their differences, even if they cannot be seen, are why they were taken. They aren't the only such students you have, and it's now clear that this is a danger that you must be made aware of."

The buck's worry shifted to calculation, then suspicion. "The incident with Sigma Theta Gamma a few years ago."

"Yes, that is part of what I intend to discuss with you."

The dean nodded. “Mister Leslie, Mister Shevet, I think you can leave now.”

Fedor headed for the door, but Niel hesitated. “Mister Richards, maybe I...”

The margay shook his head. “Dean Matheson is correct. What will be discussed going forward isn’t anything you need to be involved with.”

Need, possibly not, but Niel still wished he had a good argument for staying. If he’d known everything about his family lineage, none of this would have happened, or so he told himself. This was just more that would be kept from him, but still affected him.

Still, even if he wasn’t actually part of the Society, as most of the Survivors he’d met reminded him, Morgan Richard was a man who had power within Minneapolis beyond being Society, and his family had been key in helping Niel deal with some of what happened.

He followed Fedor outside and was immediately hugged by Kuno.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Niel replied, noting the disapproving way the secretary was eying them. “I just wish I was included in what they’re talking about.”

“Not really.” The margay took his arm and Fedor and lead them out of the room. Niel tilted an ear at his friend. Was he purposely offending the secretary? The pallas cat let himself be led without signs of even being aware of what was happening.

They’d only been back hours and hadn’t had time to do much. Thomas had dropped them at the frat, since it was the one place in the city he didn’t need to clear his arrival first. Kuno had been there and on the phone, calling his family to let them know, and before Niel could call his dad, they were on the way to the administration building, where the Richard Elder waited for them.

Now that he wasn’t required to be there, there were things Niel wanted to check in on. “How’s Erwin?”

Kuno stopped. He looked at Niel and the raccoon closed his eyes. He’d hoped he’d remembered what he saw wrong.

“They found his body, but he didn’t have any ID, and a naked guy found in a football stadium room isn’t something they want advertised. It was three days before he was identified, then his family called the frat, and we realized you were missing. I wish we’d known earlier, then we—”

“You wouldn’t have been able to do much. This was well organized. I think even the people doing the kidnapping didn’t know what they were really part of, except for the one behind it all. And he had magic too.”

Kuno nodded. “That was the prevailing theory once it became nearly impossible to locate you or Fedor, once we realized he was missing too.”

“Dario?”

“I didn’t find out about him until you and I were connected. Lav was busy with the rescue and his family doesn’t share much at the best of time. I’m close enough to you, one of my cousins was able to link us. But there was nothing I could use in what you saw, hear, or smelled, beyond the seawater. That’s how we figured out you were on a boat, but without knowing where the boat was... There was a lot of luck, and a whole lot more determination, involved in working out where you were.”

They stepped outside and the cold hit Niel again. After his time in Europe, the Minnesota winter felt even more biting. “My dad?” Niel couldn’t wait to see him, but knowing how freaked he was about the kidnapping would help.

“He’s okay. He’s better now that he knows you’re safe. He wanted to be part of the rescue once he knew it was happening, but he was a lot more chill about being sidelined than some of the people who weren’t allowed in. I think if not for the travel to Europe, the entire frat would have been there. We’re lucky Lav took Limbani, because he might have been able to talk Thomas into teleporting all of them there. Speaking of the frat, Fedor, we talked it over and Survivors are Society enough for you to move in.”

The pallas cat startled and looked at them, gaze distant.

“You okay, Fedor?” Niel asked.

“Da,” he answered after a long silence. “Thinking. Lost in head.” He’d been withdrawn for a while now, even before they were rescued.

“I said you’re welcome to move into Sigma Theta Gamma,” Kuno said.

Fedor nodded. “Will think on it.” He looked in the distance. “Will think on many things.”

“Well, the invitation stands.” Kuno looked at the sky. “I just hope everyone out there forgets we exist for a couple more years. The moment I’ve graduated, Denton Brislow can descent on this place and turn it into Security Central for all I care.”

“Isn’t he really important?” Niel asked. The name didn’t come up often, but each time there was enough awe along with it to leave the raccoon wondering how much of it was fabricated.

“And scary, and he’s supposed to be really strict about how things get done and the rule. The rulebook for his company is supposed to be like a thousand-page thick.” Kuno paused and smiled. “Supposed to be amazing in bed. Heard he’s like He’s fucking you. So who knows, maybe it’d be worth applying there.”

“Going to drop your major for some tail?”

“Godlike tail,” Kuno replied, then shook his head. “But probably not. It’s one thing knowing everything I do about military tactics and how to handle weapons. It’s another having to make use of it.”

Niel nodded. He hadn’t been involved in that fight directly, but he’d heard the stories. “This is my stop,” he said, pointing to the bus stop.

“You know I can drive you,” Kuno said. “Limbani’s back too, so he’ll be happy to come with us, keep you from getting too worried.”

“I need some time to think,” Niel replied. “I haven’t had any since arriving with your elder and the meeting with the Dean.” He looked to Fedor, who was lost in thought again. “And I think he needs more attention than I do. Whatever happened to him while we were separated, it hit him worse than me, or Wieland, in spite of a piece of metal in his side.” He shook his head. “I’ll tell you later. Right now, I have to go home.”

The margay pulled him in another hug. “Glad you’re back, buddy.”

“Me too, thanks.”

Then Niel left his friend with Fedor and started home.

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It was a good thing this had happened in winter, Niel decided, and he finally started on the path leading to his house’s door. Any other seasons and he might have found reasons after reasons to delay getting off the sidewalk. As it was, now he wanted to be inside just to get out of the fucking cold.

He reached for the handle and stopped. It was his home, and yet, there was a sense he was a stranger here. He hadn’t been gone so long this should feel like a stranger’s home, but a lot had

happened. Enough, he didn't know he was done processing most of it. Instead of reaching for the handle again, he knocked.

After a few seconds without hearing movement in the house, Niel worried, then realized his father might not have a reason to hurry. He'd been told Niel was okay, but had he been told he was back? Niel didn't knock normally, so as far as his father knew, it was one of the religious people come to—

The door opened and his father stared at him.

"Hey Dad," Niel said, feeling foolish as he gave him a small wave.

"Niel!" Stewart stepped aside and opened the door. "Come in, you have to be freezing." Once he was inside, his father started to hug him, then stepped away. "Let me take your coat." He frowned. "That's not your coat. What happened to it?"

Niel had no idea. He hadn't even thought about what had happened to his clothing. He'd been taken naked, so that might still be at the police station with the rest of the evidence.

"Let me turn up the heat. I don't want you to catch a cold." The raccoon fiddled with the thermostat. "How about some hot chicken soup? Or maybe you want something heavier after..." His ears droop. "Fuck, I'm sorry. Here I am offering you food and you don't eat anymore. Let me get—"

"Dad, stop. It's fine, I'm fine." When his father didn't lose any agitation, Niel crossed the space separating them and hugged him tightly.

His father grabbed on to him. "I was so scared I'd lost you."

"They told you I was fine, didn't they?"

Stewart tightened his grip and Niel realized it wasn't the physical danger his father had been the most scared of. "Jarod doesn't want anything to do with me." His father didn't relax. "And the feeling's mutual."

Stewart relaxed.

"I'd take that soup if you were serious about it, or a sandwich. I have been craving the taste of a roast beef sandwich for the last few days, for some reason."

"I only have ham," Stewart said, disappointed.

"I'll take ham," Niel said, smiling before his father could offer to get roast beef. "So long as we sit down and talk. I need to tell you what happened and some of the decisions I've made because of it."

As his father prepared food, a lot more than was needed for two, Niel gave him a mildly sanitized version of what he had gone through. When he'd mentioned how they used him and the others while traveling across the ocean, Niel saw for the first time that his father might be capable of murder. He had to remind him that he needed the sex to live now, but that had only diminished the murderous intent.

He ate slowly as he spoke. He didn't think food had ever tasted this good, and his father spent most of the time watching him instead of eating the food he'd prepared. By the time Niel was done with the amazing sandwich, he was done with the story and particularly proud of the timing.

"So," he said. "I met with the Dean, well I was in the office while the Elder of the Richard Family met with him. They'll come up with something to explain my absence, and I'll get to retake all the exams I missed, get to hand over whatever work has been required since then. It's going to be a lot of work, but I have access to magic now, and one of the things we can do with it is eliminate the need for sleep." He grinned as he said that, but his father didn't return the smile. "I'm planning on finishing the

year here.”

Stewart winced.

Niel put the cup down without drinking from it. He hadn't meant for his father to take that personally. "I need to make changes, Dad, and I don't think I can do that here."

His father nodded without looking at him.

"Right now I'm looking at San Francisco."

That made Stewart look up in surprise. Had his father thought Niel was going to say he was heading overseas? Didn't he believe him when Niel said he wasn't interested in maintaining a relationship with Jarod Irvine? A direct one, at least.

"Why San Francisco?" his father asked, sounding interested now. As if he was questioning his son's judgment, instead of being afraid of the reasons.

"Roland."

Stewart smiled.

"He... We... we talked." There had been more than just sex during their celebration. There had been talking and one solid argument. "He's going there now that he's eighteen. He had a few friends, and he tells me the schools are good. And that the sports teams are getting a lot better, but that they could still use some top-notch players like him and me." Niel stopped, remembering the argument. "I don't know if I'm going to be playing football there, though."

"Why not? You love it, and I don't know if you can afford the tuition without some form of support."

"Money's not going to be a problem." He didn't go into details. Niel hadn't quite believed Roland when he said his family was rich now. The idea of teleportation and Thomas being the only one able to do it, well, along with Firmin, but he could only sometimes do it, being worth a lot of money to the people who know of it was just so out there when he thought of his best friend and the normal family he was part of.

Niel didn't like the idea of Roland paying for his tuition, especially not with some of the other things they'd talked about. He hadn't made him playing football a condition, and Niel wanted to trust Roland that it wouldn't become one once he had moved there, but he'd discovered that one of the consequences of what he'd gone through was that he couldn't trust anyone entirely.

And he hated that.

"With what's happening, I need to do more than just play sports. I need to prepare. That means school and my body. I was basically at everyone's mercy during this. The few times I could do something, I was so outclassed it's a miracle I got out of any of it. Roland's friends know people in San Francisco who can help me learn to defend myself. One of them works at a private security company, so he thinks he can get me private lessons with some of the experts there. I'm not abandoning my history classes," he added at the worried expression his father gave him. "In fact, with what I gleaned, I think knowing a whole lot more about history is important."

Stewart nodded and squared his shoulders. "If you think that's what's best for you, Niel. You know I'll stand behind you the entire way."

"Would you move for me?"

"What?"

Niel chuckled at his father's confusion. "Through those friends Roland has, he's confident he

can get you a job. The way he explains it, his friends are friends with some of the people basically in charge of the city. I didn't get the entirety of it, but it's also linked to magic and the Society. But the bottom line is that if you want to come with me, you will have a job waiting for you there."

"And you're determined to follow Roland there."

Niel nodded. "I think..." he swallowed. Wow, was this harder than he'd expected to say. "I think that after everything my boyfriend did to get me back, it's important I be with him and see what this turns into."

"So it's serious between you two?"

"We think so."

Stewart sighed theatrically. "Well, not that it's a surprise, but there goes any hope I've had for grandkids."

Niel took his cup of coffee. "Oh, I don't know. I mean, there is magic, after all." He took a slow sip and watched his father's utter shock as what that meant sunk in.

Well, it wasn't like there were any chances he and Roland would stop trying to impregnate each other. Roland basically lived for sex now, and Niel needed sex to live.

They were practically perfect for each other.

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