

Chapter 08

Paul glared at Shila as the hare burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” the hare said between sobs. “It’s just been so bad.”

Shila’s expression didn’t change, but she put the phone away. Paul took a box off a seat and guided the hare to it.

“Can you get her some water?”

The pangolin looked ready to argue, but with an annoyed shake of the head left the living room.

“I’m sorry,” the hare repeated, clutching the cane to herself. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

“You know Donal?”

She shook her head. “He’s someone that’s been mentioned at the shelters Doctor Merlin volunteered at. He did a lot of charity work. I was his nurse,” she added. “They said that if you couldn’t go to the police, Mister Hines was who would help you.” She ran a tender hand over the cane. “I can’t go to the police.” She was crying again.

“Why’s that?” Shila asked brusquely, offering the filled glass. “And what’s your name?”

The hare dried her eye with the back of her sleeve. “I’m so sorry. That’s unforgivable. Thank you.” She sipped the glass. “My name’s Nina Haldi. I’ve worked for Doctor Merlin for the last six years.” Her smile was sad. “He found me right out of nursing school. We got along so well. If I’d been older, I would have asked him on a date.”

Paul looked at Shila.

“How would I know that? He might be in his seventies.”

“Was,” Nina whispered.

Paul squeezed her arm. “I’m sorry.”

“What happened?” Shila asked, her tone softer.

“I.. I don’t know.” Nina looked at them, looking lost. “The doctor was throwing himself into helping the sick, but nothing seemed to help. For one who got better, half a dozen got worse. He kept talking about compatibility, virulence, propagation. I mean, those are things about contagion, but it was the way he said the words when he thought he was alone. Like saying them was supposed to...do something. I figured—” she swallowed “—it was the strain getting to him. I tried to get him to take breaks, but he couldn’t stop. Said he had to stop it. Like it was his personal responsibility to save everyone.” Another sad smile. “He cared so much.”

Paul worried she’d cut herself, the way her hand moved up and down the cane, but she seemed to know how to do that without drawing blood.

“Then what?” Shila whispered.

“There was this boy. On the third day, I think. A caracal with the sweetest smile, despite how sick he was. Watching him suffer just about broke my heart. I think it broke something in Doctor Merlin, because he fought harder for that boy than I’d ever seen him fight for anyone. All of a sudden, the boy was better and finally had an actual win. It was like all of a sudden, there was hope again. Hope that we could beat this.”

She fell quiet, looking at the cane. Paul saw tear splash on the metal.

“And that when it stuck again,” she said, her tone turning angry. “Whatever this sickness is, it grabbed onto the boy and pulled him down hard. It was like it knew we could see a light at the end of this tunnel and it wanted to extinguish that hope forever.” She looked up, her eyes hard. “But Doctor Merlin wasn’t going to give up and let it win. He was at the boy’s bedside, working to save him. What he was doing didn’t make any sense to me, but it wasn’t like I cared any more. All any of us wanted was a miracle to tell us we could win. And it happened. Doctor Merlin had his cane on the boy, then he was better. He was cured.” She fell silent, looking at

the cane again.

The way Shila looked at Nina, Paul felt compelled to ask. "The Doctor?"

Nina shook her head, and the pangolin's expression hardened.

"What happened?" Paul asked gently.

"You won't believe me," Nina whispered. "It's..." she trailed off.

He placed a hand on her arm. "Trust me. There's little you can tell us that'll make us think you're crazy."

Her laughter turned into a snort as a sob interrupted it. She wiped her nose. "When he used his cane, that wasn't the strange thing. He always had it near him, and by then almost always held it as he treated patients. It was... He looked at me and he... he looked at peace. It was eerie. One moment, he looked ready to pull his fur out. The next it was like all his problems were over. Like he'd... I don't know. Not given up, but like he was okay with whatever was coming next. He smiled at me and said: take care of them. And then he was gone." She looked at Paul. "I don't mean he was dead. I mean, he wasn't there anymore."

She looked from one to the other, and didn't seem to notice Shila's stunned expression. "I know it sound crazy. At first I thought I'd cracked under the stress. I told myself he'd just left the room while I blanked out; but his cane was still on the boy's chest. He would never leave without it," she stated, then uncertainty crept in her voice. "And... his clothes were pooled on the floor, where he'd been standing."

She looked at Paul, desperation in her eyes.

"The boy?" Paul asked.

She seemed surprised he wasn't calling her crazy, then beamed. "He's cured. It's like he's never been infected. None of the other doctors could figure it out, and other than drawing blood for the CDC to work on it, there were too many patients to spend time thinking about it."

"When was that?" Shila asked, her tone hollow, her expression crestfallen.

Nina shrugged. "I don't know." She frowned. "A few days ago? It's been hectic."

The pangolin stood and headed for the hall.

"Shila?" Paul called.

"I'm going to look if Hines had something harder than water in this mess of a house."

"A few days ago is when the news first reported on this," Paul said. "Are you saying it's been this bad for a lot longer than that?"

Nina shrugged. "I don't know how bad it's been elsewhere in the city. The situation was too depressing already. We didn't need all the bad news from the radio. If Doctor Merlin's clinic wasn't the epicenter, we were damned close to it."

A cabinet door slammed shut deeper in the house and Nina startled.

"The first patient showed up three weeks ago," Nina said, once she'd gotten over that. "Doctor Ellington thought she was a lost cause, but Doctor Merlin cured them." She frowned. "Or we thought he had. We didn't know what she had, so when her vitals improved after a few hours under the doctor's care, we thought it was just a passing bug."

Another cabinet door slammed, accompanied by Shila cursing.

"It was after a week of that," she picked up, "that Doctor Janisse called the CDC. Turned out she wasn't the first to call about it. The CDC was keeping things quiet. I guess that when you heard about it, it's because it had grown too bad for anyone to keep a lid on it."

"You'd think," Shila grumbled, "that a guy with all this junk lying around would have something stronger than beer in this mess." She offered a bottle to Paul and Nina. Paul took it, but the hare shook her head. "So, you held on to the st—cane since then?" Shila dropped in the seat she cleared.

Nina shook her head. "I lost track of it in the chaos that followed the boy's recovery. I don't know what I'd have done if we hadn't been so busy. Maybe see if Doctor Merlin had family and if they wanted it. But the next time I saw it, Doctor Ellington had it and was using it as she walked, like she'd been doing that all her life. When asked her about it, she got that strange look on her face and said: 'it's so Merlin can keep working with us.' And trust me, it didn't sound like she meant it in the sense of honoring his spirit or anything like that..." her expression grew troubled.

"What?" Shila asked, leaning forward.

"I... didn't think much of it at the time. We were all under stress, so when she started acting differently, she wasn't exactly the only one, but..." she looked worried.

"It's okay," Paul said, cutting off Shila. "We believe you about what happened to Doctor Merlin, so this isn't going to be any different. Believe me, we know how strange the world can be at time." He was surprised Shila didn't snap at him for basically admitting magic was real.

"I caught her muttering," Nina said, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Not to herself, but like she

was talking to someone when there was no one there.” She hesitated. “One time, I heard her address that invisible person as Merlin.”

Shila’s eyes went wide. “What happened after that?”

“The next morning,” Nina said, sounding uncertain. “That night had been especially rough. One of the nurses said Doctor Ellington just up and left. Walked out in the middle of the night. I couldn’t find anyone who saw her leave, but she wasn’t at the clinic and... no one admitted to finding her clothes pooled by the cane. Doctor Oliaster nearly immediately took it and in under an hour, I could hear him muttering. This time, when he disappeared, there were three of us with him in the patient’s room. It had looked to me like he was going a laying on of hands, but with the cane, then he just wasn’t there anymore, and I swear, I saw his clothing fall to the ground. It was like he’d just been erased.”

She caressed the cane again. “I know Doctor Merlin would have understood why we had to lock up his cane. It was the only thing every event had in common. We were too busy to really think about what it meant that he and two other doctors had just vanished like that, and at least I threw myself into the work so I wouldn’t be able to think about it.”

She eyes the bottle on the box between them, but when Paul reach for it she shook her head.

“Even with the cane under lock in his locker, people continued to vanish. Now we figured they just couldn’t take the stress. I thought about walking out a few times, but Doctor Merlin hadn’t, and I didn’t want to disappoint his memory. Then I noticed that his locker wasn’t properly closed. More than that, someone had tempered with the latch so it couldn’t be closed properly, let alone locked. Before I could bring it up to the others, a nurse was taking it. I tried to stop him, but he said that he was calling to him, with it needed him to fix this, that...” She swallowed. “That the others had worked it out and all he had to do was take it and end this sickness.”

She looked at them. “I snatched it before he could take it and ran. I wasn’t going to let what had happened to the others happen to him too, or anyone else.” He looked at the cane, her fingers still running over it.

“Aren’t you worried what happened to them will happen to you?” Paul wondered if he should take it from her.

“I don’t hear any voices,” Nina replied, then smiled sweetly. “And Doctor Merlin would never let something like that happen to me.”

He looked at Shila, hoping for an informed opinion. She was the expert. All he had to go on was the stuff he’d pieced together from Thomas’s ranting and the stories of what happened that led to him needing to vent.

Paul was happy not to be part of that world; all it seemed to being was stress.

Shila looked scared, and when she noticed him looking, she nodded to the kitchen and stood.

“Can I get you more water?” Paul asked, taking the still half-full glass. “I’ll be right back.”

She was muttering a string of nos when he joined her and if she had fur, she’d be ripping it out right now.

“What’s wrong?” Paul asked.

“This is the Nazis again.”

Paul tried to make that leap and crashed. “The Nazis are spreading the sickness?” he tried.

“What? Don’t be stupid. The Nazis were working for the Chamber.”

“I thought they’d been used by the Chamber.”

That story had been harder to piece together, since Niel, rather than Thomas, had been involved in most of it. While Niel was much better at recounting stories than Thomas was, he and Paul didn’t share the deep friendship that made Thomas come to him anytime he had a bad day.

“Same thing.” She dismissed the comment with a wave of the hand. “Don’t you see? This isn’t about going after Merlin. It’s about putting the staff into the hands of as many people as they can and forcing them to reach Apotheosis one after they others. If that girl hadn’t taken it out of there, who knows how many other would have been put through that.”

“But we already knew this was the Chamber. How does this change anything?”

She stared at him. “Do you have any idea of the kind of power needed to keep something like this going? I thought this was an attack they’d lost control of. You heard her. Merlin’s clinic was the center of it. I figured they’d thrown this at him, but they couldn’t pull it back and it reverted to a normal deadly sickness that would have run its course. I should have realized there was nothing normal about how to sickness kept going. That next doctor to pick it up would have known what Merlin knew, and he’d have worked out how something normal worked. They’d have thought it was nothing more than ‘Divine Inspiration’ but bam, it would be over. There would be questions for weeks about how it could end so suddenly, but I’d have taken that

over what we're actually dealing with."

Paul took the bottle out of her hand as soon as she took it out of the cabinet. "And what are we dealing with?"

"They have a viral talisman powering..." she frowned. "No, can't be that. Even that would need way more power than the Chamber can have access to. That, or it'd be do fucking big it'd be impossible to hide." She grabbed the bottle out of his hand. "They have a fucking viral staff." She paused in the process of twisting the cap. "They have the Flemming." The bottle hit the floor, and the cap flew off as she put her phone to her ear.

"The what?" Paul grabbed a stack of ratty dish towel and dropped them on the spilled beer.

"You know if Alexander Fleming?" she demanded. "Pick up," she ordered the phone.

"He's who figured out how Penicillin works. Wait. Are you saying he was a Practitioner who made a viral staff?"

"Yes, he was. No, he didn't. The staff's older than him, Grant! What did you do with the Fleming? Three years ago. Come on, stop! You think I'd risk calling you in the middle of my trouble just cause I missed the sound of your fucking voice? What did you do with it?"

She frowned. "Are you sure?" She nodded, then turned her phone off. "Okay, it's not the Fleming. Grant had to destroy it when the Chamber made a play for it."

"So, no viral staff?" Paul threw the went towels in the sink.

"No Fleming staff, so we have a chance. It's the most powerful of the viral staves. If they had that, I'd have told you to run and never look back. Anything else and we—"

"What's Fleming staff?" Nina asked, stepping into the kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" Shila demanded.

"The living room is at the end of the hall, and you were basically screaming," she replied, looking bashful. "I couldn't help hearing."

The pangolin glared at the hare, before swinging it on the tiger. "You know what? You let her in, you explain thing." She pulled a glass from a box on the counter.

Paul figured his layperson's understanding would make the situation more relatable than any technical language Shila would have used.

"What you're holding is what a certain group of people who can use actual magic call a staff. Doctor Merlin was part of that group, and he used his staff, the cane, to help people. But if they push themselves too hard while using their magic, they become part of the staff. That's what you saw happen."

Nina clutched the cane to herself as if she was afraid Paul would take it.

"There's another group," he continued, "who want the staves like this one, but they think that the more people it has absorbed, the more powerful it is. When we got here, we thought the epidemic was an attack on Doctor Merlin, but your story tells us they were interested in just taking his staff. You saved a lot of people by taking the staff out of there."

Nina looked at Shila. "Magic is real?" she said that with a steadiness that surprised Paul. "And Doctor Merlin was..." her chuckled sounded forced. "Merlin?"

"No," Shila stated. "Just a Practitioner who happened to share the name of a famous fictitious wizard.

"Merlin's not real?" Paul asked, surprised.

She glared at him. "Really?"

"Just told me Alexander Fleming was a Practitioner. My best friend teleports—that for another time," he told Nina as she looked at him, stunned. "There's so many magical factions out there, I'm amazed no one outside of them actually knows they exist, so yeah, I thought Merlin was real."

"Fiction," she replied. "Like a lot of stuff people think is real."

"Alright. How do we deal with this?"

Shila stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Nina cleared her throat. "You want to try to stop the magical people with staves that can make an entire city sick?"

"In principle," he replied, "who wouldn't? But myself personally, no. I'm not qualified, but we're the ones who know what's going on, so we have to decide what we need to do with that information. Shila, do you know which family is in charge of Denver? That's another group," he told Nina as her eyes grew wide. "I know Thomas is terrified of being seen here because of the Brislow guy, but my understanding is that he's not the one in charge."

"It's the Cormoran," she replied. "But we can't go to them."

"Why not?" Paul did his best not to let Nina's still shocked expression make him chuckle. She was definitely out of her depth, while he was only in it to his crotch, thanks to Thomas and all his ranting.

"Because we can't prove what we know."

“We have the staff.”

“Which they probably know nothing about, let alone that Merling was a Practitioner. Did Thomas ever tell you that we don’t exactly play nice with others?”

“He did, but his is one of those situations where you think beyond yourself and of the greater good. What happened if the Chamber loses control of a sickness powered by a staff and not just a talisman?”

“And what exactly do we tell them?” she snapped. “Hi, you have a group of insane wiz—”

“Insane?” Nina exclaimed, her tone rising in what sounded like fear to Paul.

“—ards in your city,” Shila glared at the hare and kept going. “But we don’t know where they are hiding, and we don’t know what they’re using to make everyone sick, but hey, how about you go and do something about it?”

“Why do you think they’re insane?” Nina asked, her tone controlled.

“What else do you call someone willing to sacrifice a whole fucking city just for a power up?”

Nina was perfectly still, and Paul wondered how hard it was for her not to bolt away, and was impressed by her determination.

“What if we tell them where they’re hiding?” Paul asked and earned himself a surprised look from Nina and a disbelieving one from Shila.

“And how the fuck do you figure we do that?”

“By asking the guy who specialized in finding lost and hidden stuff.”

The pangolin stared at him.

“Look,” Paul said. “I leave the heroics to the people with the training for it. But if the only way to convince those capable of stopping this is to find out where the chamber is hiding, I say we do that much.”

Shila nodded slowly, but when she spoke, her tone was final. “We find Donal. He helps us figure out where the Chamber is. We tell the Cormoran. Not one thing more.”

“I’m good with that,” Paul said.

“Me too,” Nina said. “Although I don’t know who those people are.”

“And why do you think you get to come along, girly?” Shila demanded.

Nina straightened, and for a moment looked like someone able to take on the world. Almost immediately, that person vanished under the pangolin’s unimpressed glare.

“You said I saved people when I took Doctor Merlin’s staff from the clinic. I want to continue helping. Now that I know what’s going on, I can’t just sit here and wait for it to be over.”

Shila looked ready to argue. No, Paul decided. She looked ready to kick the hare to the curb. But before he could start to talk her down, her expression shifted. The golden tiger might not know Shila all that well, but the expression that was forming on her face was one he’d seen many times among the pranksters within the biotech and medical field.

It was the one that screamed: I have an idea. It might not be the brightest one out there, but it is going to be highly interesting to make it happen.

“You’re going to want to share with the class before you even think of acting on that, Shila,” Paul warned.