

## Chapter 07

“You. Stop moving.”

Paul stopped at the authoritative tone, grabbing Shila’s arm. The man had clearly meant the two of them. They’d been walking along the side of the road, ignored due to the magic Shila had uploaded to both their phones.

Until now.

Paul turned, and a National Guard walked in their direction. “I need to see your credentials. Only—” He put a hand to his ear. “Say again?”

Something exploded on the other side of the mall’s parking lot.

“You two, go to the registry and present your credentials.” He ran in the smoke’s direction.

Paul looked around. The other National Guards were heading the same way, not paying attention to the two of them.

“Did you cause that?” he whispered.

“Did I have my phone in my hand?” the pangolin snapped. “Then no, I didn’t.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him. “Come on, before the Chamber’s magic causes one of them to see us again.”

“You really think they’re the reason?”

“Who else would do it? They’re the ones behind this. They’re going to have talismans everywhere to make it as impossible as possible for anyone to sneak in and get in their way.”

They passed around the barricades, these guards not looking their way. They were focused on the mass of people on the other side of the no-man’s-land another set of barricade delineated.

“But this isn’t invisibility, right?” Paul asked as they skirted around that one. A handful of people noticed them, but went back to screaming to be let out. Unlike the guards, they didn’t care about two idiots walking into the contaminated zone. “You said you’d know servers for that.”

“Yes. Bending the laws of physics need processing power.”

“Then this is dependent on how intensely someone is looking for us, isn’t it?”

“No one’s looking for us. They don’t know we’re here.”

They were now at the back of the mass, with no chances a guard would see them.

“I don’t mean us specifically, but like that guard looking for anyone not following the rules and approaching the quarantine zone.”

She grumbled something that sounded unflattering. If it was directed at him, or the situation, Paul decided not to think about.

The sounds died away as they moved further in, and within blocks, it was as if they were the only ones in the city.

“Well, well, well,” someone said. A rat in a suit stepped out from behind a parked truck. “Guys, don’t bother with the lock. This is going to be so much easier.”

Or looking for any easy mark, Paul added to his list of things that might defeat Shila’s ‘don’t notice us’ magic.

Looters and Muggers. Paul grumbled. Why couldn’t they have encountered the other set of people emergencies created, those who banded together for the greater good, instead of personal gain.

A cat and a collie joined the rat; their suits weren’t as clean. Clearly, they were taking the orders. They weren’t armed, other than with their claws, and the mean expression that said they wouldn’t mind using them.

“Do you have something against them?”

"I don't do physical," she growled. "That's why you're here."

He let that one pass on account she was stressed.

"Now, why don't you two hand over your phones, unlocked, if you don't mind," the rat said as he reached them. "And there won't be... too much problems. For either of you, I think." He reached for Shila, leering at her.

Paul reacted. Then counted his lucky stars and ignored the way his fist hurt as he grabbed Shila's arm and they ran. The dog and cat stood there, gawking at the unmoving rat sprawled on the ground.

They made it a dozen blocks before Shila wheezed him to a stop. He watched behind them while she caught her breath. When she complained under her breath, he figured she could move and he rejoined her. This time, the grumbling was clearly about how the magic wasn't working how it should. She blamed the lack of processing, whatever the Chamber had interfering, and every random thing, other than her miscalculating.

"Look, Shila," Paul said, massaging his sore hand. "How sure are you we're protected against whatever this sickness is?"

"I put the best antiviral on your phone," she replied curtly. "Don't lose that, and you'll be fine."

"But how does that work? How does an antiviral program you wrote on a phone keep a virus from infecting me?"

She leveled her gaze at him. "Ma-gic."

"You get that even knowing it's real, that doesn't offer a lot of comfort."

"Then you shouldn't bother asking." She started walking.

"How about we drive?" Paul motioned to the car partway on the sidewalk. There were more along the road, but they were properly parked.

She looked at him, it and back, then shrugged. "You're the one with the starter talisman."

The door was unlocked, and the phone slot empty. They'd left in a hurry, but not so much that they forgot their phone. He slotted his in.

Nothing happened.

He went to the next car, also unlocked, this one with a phone in the slot, out of power, just like the car. The next one was also out of power.

"Do you think this is part of the Chamber's plans?"

Shila shrugged, looking at her phone. "Could be. I can't say without being sure what they're after."

"Merlin."

"I mean the rest. There's chaos around the hospital, but is that what they want, or just the result of people being stupid? They can drain the cars to keep people from just driving away, but then why bother with the National Guard? I say they just left their car's charge run out and didn't make it to the city's edge."

"How much chaos is there?" Paul asked, instead of arguing. It felt too coincidental for three cars in a row to be dead. The one with the phone in made sense. With the phone in, the car would remain on; but the others? He remembered something about how pulling a phone out didn't automatically shut down the car, but he was confident it was only if it was in motion.

"Mostly the clinics and hospitals," Shila said. "Everyone and their quad's there looking to be cured, hoping the hospital magic will keep them from getting sick, or selling the cure to the idiots loitering around. Elsewhere's mostly quiet, according to the news sites."

"I guess we're walking to Donal's house, then."

"Looks like. Where is it?"

"It's..." Paul trailed off.

"You know where he is, don't you?"

"In Thomas's house." He took his phone out and started a search for Thomas Hertz in the Denver directory, and came back with nothing. "I was sure it was under his name," Paul muttered. Thomas had bought the house for the squirrel so he wouldn't have to live on the street when he returned to Denver, and considering how exasperated his best friend had been at Donal's resistance to give up homelessness, Paul had expected Thomas to put the house under his name to make sure Donal wouldn't sell it and go back to living on the street.

"What's Donal's last name?" Paul asked Shila.

"What am I, a rolodex?"

"You're both Practitioners."

She stared at him. "Are you one of those people who thinks all Canadians know each other?"

"There aren't as many Practitioners as there are Canadians," he replied.

"I don't know him." She turned and grumbled.

Paul racked his memories for the squirrel's last name. It had to have come up. The man had restored

Paul's memories. Surely someone had introduced him as more than Donal, who'll restore your memories.

"Hines," Shila said with a sigh of defeat. "Grant mentioned it in one of his message."

Paul did the search on Donal Hines. "And there is only one Donal Hines living in Denver." He smiled. "I just hope it's the right one."

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Judging by Shila's complaining about the quantities of talisman she had to dismantle, they had the right house.

The walk there had been tedious, but uneventful, if Paul ignored his attempt at borrowing a car when he noticed someone watching them out of a house's window and the shotgun the woman had raised as he'd approached. He'd forgotten about another kind of people who surfaced during emergencies. The Isolationists. Those who believed that so long as they stayed in their house and avoiding all interaction, they'd get through the bad times.

Shila grabbed the handle, turned it and walked into the still closed door.

"What?" She glared at her phone, swiped and typed. "I've deactivated the locks, you last century piece of shit. There aren't any active talismans." She tried the door again, to the same lack of result.

"I'm going to check the back."

She didn't reply.

The yard was small and filled with plastic bins. Old tires rested against the fence at the back. What he thought was an axel was buried under tarps. He found a crowbar and brought that to the door. It too wouldn't open. He moved to the window next to it, a storage room, from all the boxed in it.

He hesitated, reminded himself Shila said she'd turned off all the magical defenses, and slammed the end of the bar into the window's jam. He'd pay for the repairs once this was done.

Navigating through the room proved to be an adventure. If there was a path around the boxes and bins. Paul hadn't found it. The halls had yet more of them, but against the wall. The living room had more boxes, but also a cleared space with a workbench and tools.

If someone was a Practitioner, did the qualifier of hoarder still apply?

Paul smiled as he reached the door, flicked the deadbolt, and opened the door for Shila. She glared at the purely mechanical lock, then froze in place as she looked the living room over.

"How does he find anything?" she asked.

"His thing's lost stuff," Paul replied, studying the workbench. "I'm guessing that when he needs something, it's just there for him to find."

"Not how it works," she grumbled.

Bent nails were arranged on top of an envelope with shoe tread marks on it in a way that felt intentional. Next to that was a bottle of glue with half the content looking like it was dry through the translucent plastic. Scissors, crafting knives of all sorts as wool as tapes were in containers waiting for... Paul wasn't sure if they were to help make or incorporate in what was being made.

"Any idea what he was working on?" he asked.

"I don't work with physical stuff." He walked deeper into the house. "So I can't tell you what concept he was aiming for."

"So, we find a place to settle in and wait for him to come home?" Paul looked around. There might be a couch under some of the boxes.

"I'd rather find something telling me where he went."

Paul joined her in the kitchen. "Can't you program something to find him?"

She looked at him. "You're asking me to find someone whose staff deals with lost stuff? Think that one through before you ask another dumb question."

"Fine. So he can only be found if he wants to be. Thomas told me Donal works with the homeless. Maybe the shelters will know where he is, or how to contact him."

When Shila opened cabinets, Paul saw yet more boxes in them. When she opened the fridge, it was empty.

"Are you sure he lives here?" she asked.

"Thomas gave him the house, what he does with it..." he looked around at all the boxes. "I have no idea." He looked through the two other rooms. Even the bathroom had stuff in it, although the bath and toilet were accessible. "He sleeps here, I think," he called from the bedroom. It was the one room, no, two, the attacked bathroom was also clear of boxes or other kind of storage.

Shila stood in the doorway, pensive. She shook herself. "I didn't believe him when he told me he'd come across another who'd crafted a staff without help. We're supposed to be a once in a century occurrence." He looked over her shoulder. "But seeing this place... if it's representative of how his mind works..."

“Number are just statistic,” Paul said. “And I’ve listened to Niel bitch about the lack of clear records for his research, so how accurate can the dataset of a faction as loosely organized as the Practitioners be?”

“Not going to take a dig at someone like this guy bursting my bubble of specialness?” Shila asked with forced humor. It was definitely forced. Paul hadn’t heard her say one funny thing in the few days he’d known her.

“It won’t help anything,” he replied with a shrug. “And with how you look, you’re doing a job of it without my help.” She deflated, and Paul asked, cautiously. “Is the idea that there’s someone else who discovered magic on his own, hitting you that hard?”

“It shouldn’t,” she snapped. “Never even thought I was special before Grant told me about this.” She forced a shrug. “And like you said, it’s not helping anything.” He offered Paul pamphlets. “I found these under a box on the counter.”

There were for shelters. The corners of most were jagged, as if they’d been taped to something and had been pulled off. The addresses mean nothing to him, but the dates that were circled on each were that of the day the news broke about the epidemic.

“Could he have found out what the Chamber was planning? Maybe these places are linked to them, somehow?”

“No idea. Normally I’d say no one finds anything unless they go looking for it. But with this guy? Maybe it did just land in his lap. But you said he works with shelters. Maybe those dates were just when he was planning on going there.”

“Three on the same day?”

“They aren’t that far from each other according to google.”

“Okay, then we go there and hope—”

There was a knock at the door. “Mister Hines?” a woman called, her voice trembling. “Mister Hines, I was told you can help me.”

Shila caught his arm as he exited the bedroom and whispered, “What are you doing?”

“To open the door. She sounds scared.”

“She could be a looter,”

“Looters don’t knock and announce they’re there.”

She rolled her eyes as the woman called again.

“Are you really going to leave her out there?”

The leveled look she replied with was answer enough.

He pulled his arm out of her hand and went to the door. He looked through the peephole at a white hare in a pale blue dress, looking around nervously. She might have something in her arms, but that was below what he could see clearly.

He opened the door, and she stepped back, startled, bringing a metal cane up between them. Then, as if realizing Paul meant her no harm, she lowering it.

“Mister Hines?” she asked, sounding uncertain.

“No, we’re... friend of his. He’s out right now.”

Her eyes narrowed for a second, then she shook herself, and her expression softened. That was good, because Paul had no idea how he’d prove he knew Donal if it came down to it.

He stepped out of her way and motioned for her to enter. “Come on in. Maybe we can help you instead.”

“How can—” the hare started.

“What are you doing with Merlin’s staff?” Shila demanded, phone in hand and a finger ready to tap the screen. Her expression was as hard as Paul had ever seen.

Looking at the metal cane, he saw it was made of scalpels welded together in such a way that, even as it made the body and handle, the edges were on the outside and looked sharp enough to cut.

Now that he’d seen how odd it was, Paul had to admit that he’d have asked if this was a staff.