

Storyboard-8

The hare burst into tears and Paul glared at Shila.

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

Shila didn’t change her expression, but she put away her phone, so Paul guided the hare to a seat without any boxes on it. “Can you get her some water?”

The pangolin looked ready to argue, but with an annoyed shake of the head vanished deeper into the house.

“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. “I worked for Doctor Merlin as his nurse. He was a good man. He did a lot of charity, and in the last few years, we’ve been hearing that if someone is in trouble who can’t go to the police, Mister Hines will help them out. And I can’t go to anyone.” She started crying again.

“Why’s that?” Shila asked, offering the hare a glass of water. “And what’s your name?”

The hare dried her tear with the back of her sleeve. “I’m so sorry, that’s unforgivable. Thank you.” She took the glass and sipped it. “My name’s Nina Haldi. I’ve worked for Doctor Merlin for six years now.” Her smile was sad. “He found me 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.

The pangolin shrugged. “I think he’s in his seventies now.”

“Was,” Nina said softly.

“I’m sorry,” Paul said, squeezing her arm.

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

“I don’t know.” Nina looked at them, lost. “The doctor was throwing himself into helping the sick, but nothing seemed to help. For everyone who got better, half a dozen were getting sicker. He kept talking about compatibility, virulence, propagation. I mean, those are things about contagion, but it was how he talked about it when he thought he was alone like the words themselves were supposed to do something. I thought.” She swallowed. “I thought the strain was getting to him. I tried to get him to take breaks, but he said he had to stop this. Like it was his calling.” Another sad smile. “He cared so much.”

She ran a hand along the shaft of the cane and Paul worried she’d cut herself, but the cane didn’t draw blood.

“Then what?” Shila asked softly.

Nina looked up, eyes wide. “Then I thought I was the one who was crazy. There was this boy, that was on the third day I think. A caracal with the sweetest smile, despite how sick he was. Seeing him like that just about broke my heart. And I think it broke something in

Doctor Merlin, because he fought so hard for the boy. Then, then he got better and we thought that finally, we'd have some good news. Just one would have made such a difference. But just as we thought he was over it, whatever this sickness is, it latched onto him and pulled him down hard. I mean it was like that thing knew how hopeful we were and he just wanted to screw with us." She spat the last words, her anger overcoming her sadness. "But Doctor Merlin wasn't going to let it win. He fought it he.. Did something, I have no idea what. He had his cane on the boy. He was always with his cane during those last days. Then he looked at me. He said to take care of them and... and then he was gone."

She drank hurriedly. "I thought I'd just blanked under the stress, it had been a lot in only a few days, but his cane was still on the boy. He would never have left without it," she said, adamant. "And... and his clothes were pooled on the floor, just where he'd been standing."

"The boy?" Paul asked.

She beamed. "He was cured. It was like he'd never been infected. It baffled the other doctors, but other than taking blood from the boy for the CDC, there were too many other patients."

"When was that?" Shila asked, looking shell-shocked.

Nina shrugged and thought back. "I don't know. A few days ago."

The pangolin stood and headed to the back.

"Shila?" Paul called.

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

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

"I don't know how bad it's been elsewhere in the city. I hadn't had time to listen to the news. If the doctor's clinic wasn't at the epicenter of this, we were damned close. The first patient showed up three weeks ago, Doctor Ellington thought they were a lost cause, but Doctor Merlin cured them." She frowned. "Or we thought he had. We didn't know what we were dealing with then, so when her vitals improved after a few hours under the doctor's care and she felt better, we thought it was just a passing bug. It was maybe a week after that, one of the doctors at the clinic called the CDC. She wasn't the first to call, we just didn't know about it. They were keeping it quiet. I guess that by the time you heard about it, it was just too bad for them to be able to keep it from the news."

Shila returned and offered a bottle of beer to Paul and Nina. Paul took it, but the hare shook her head.

"You'd think a guy with all this junk would have something stronger than beer somewhere in there," the pangolin grumbled as she dropped in a chair. "You've held onto the s—cane since then?"

Nina shook her head. "Before I could take it and... I don't know, I guess I would have tried to find out if Doctor Merlin had family so they could have it. Before I could, Doctor Ellington took it and she started walking with it. So that Merlin would continue working alongside us, she said..."

Shila leaned forward. "What?"

"She started acting strangely after that. Nothing big, and I guess we all just thought it was the stress. I mean, I don't think any of us had even processed what it meant that Doctor Merlin's clothing was just pooled where he'd been. So the rest of us cracking wouldn't be too much of a stretch." She bit her lower lip.

"However strange it sounds," Paul said in as reassuring of a tone as he could manage, "you can say it. We know something about how strange the world can be at times." That Shila didn't glare at him for basically stating they knew about magic, told him how affected by this news she was.

"She started muttering, but not to herself. It was like she was holding a conversation with someone who wasn't there." She hesitated. "I swear, that once, she called this invisible person Merlin."

Shila's head snapped up. "What happened after that?"

Nina shrugged. "The next morning, that night had been especially hard on all of us. The next morning someone said Ellington had just left. Just walked out in the middle of the night. No one saw her do that, but she was just gone, so..." she looked at the cane as she trailed off. "Doctor Oliaster took to carrying Doctor Merlin's cane too. And even faster than Ellington, he was muttering. When he disappeared, there were three of us there in the patient's room. He was so out of it that to me it looked like he was doing a laying on of hands, only using the cane and then he was just gone and I saw. I swear, I saw his clothing fall to the ground as if he'd been just erased." She caressed the cane. "I know Doctor Merlin would have understood that his cane was the only thing the events had in common, so we put it in his locker and closed it. We were still too busy dealing with the epidemic for the impossibility of him just vanishing before our eyes to sink in. I think I started keeping myself from stopping just so I wouldn't have to think about it."

She eyed the bottle on the coffee table and Paul reached for it, but Nina shook her head.

"People continued vanishing, and without the cane, we just thought they left because they couldn't take it anymore. I thought about leaving, but Doctor Merlin hadn't, so I stayed. I noticed that his locker was being tampered with. The lock on it wasn't closed fully, then I caught one of the new nurses taking it out. I tried to stop him, but he told me that he heard it call to him. That with it, he could fix this that..." she swallowed. "The others before her had worked it out. When I caught up to her she was already vanishing." She looked at them. "That's when I took the cane. Those who we'd thought had left, they'd used it and it had... I don't know what happened."

She looked at the cane, still running her fingers on it.

"Aren't you worried that what happened to them will happen to you?" Paul asked, wondering if he should take it away from her.

"I don't hear any voices," Nina said, then smiled sweetly. "And Doctor Merlin wouldn't let something like that happen to me."

Paul looked at Shila hoping she'd weigh in. She was the expert here. All he had were the stuff he'd pieced together from Thomas's ranting, and then his stories of what had led to

him needing to vent.

Paul was happy not to be part of that world, it seemed to be nothing but stress.

The expression on Shila's face was one of fear. When she noticed him looking she nodded to the kitchen.

"Can I get you more water?" Paul said, taking the still half-full glass. "I'll be right back." Shila had already left.

She was muttering strings of nos when he entered the kitchen and if she had fur, she'd been ripping it out.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked.

"This is the Nazis again," she said.

Paul had trouble making the leap, no, he couldn't make the leap. "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, and not Thomas, had been involved for the majority of it, and while Niel was much better at recounting stories than Thomas, he and Paul didn't share the deep friendship that made Thomas come to him each time he had a bad day.

"Same thing," she said with a dismissive wave of the hand. "Don't you see it? 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 the other. If that girl hadn't taken it out of there, who knows how many more nurses and doctors would have been put through that."

"But we already know the Chamber was involved, this doesn't change that, does it?"

She looked at him. "Do you have any idea the kind of power needed to maintain something like this? I thought this had been an attack that had gotten out of hand. You heard her, Merlin's clinic was the center of it. I figured they's lost control, and it had reverted to a normal deadly sickness that would eventually run its course. But the next person to pick up the staff would have known what was going on. They'd think it was just a revelation, but it sounds like Merlin had worked it out, so they'd know that. And it would have brought it to an end quick. Probably too quickly to keep people from asking how that had happened, but I would have taken that over the alternative." She took a bottle of beer out of a cabinet, which Paul took out of her hand.

"What is the alternative?"

"They have a viral talisman powering... no, it can't be a talisman, even that would need way more power than I can see the Chamber having, or it would have to be so fucking big they couldn't hide it. Someone had a fucking viral staff." She held onto the counter.

"They have the Flemming." She had her phone to her ear.

"The what?" Paul asked.

"You know of Alexander Flemming?" she demanded. "Pick up," she told the phone.

"He explained how Penicillin works. Wait are you saying it was a Practitioner and he made a viral staff?"

"Yes, and not. The staff's older than him. Grant! What did you do with the Flemming?"

Three years ago, come on, stop. What, you think I'd risk calling you in the middle of my troubles because I missed hearing the sound of your fucking voice? What did you do with it?"

She frowned. "Are you sure?" she nodded to herself, then turned her phone off. "Okay, it's not the Flemming. Grant had to destroy it to keep it from falling into the Chamber's hands."

"So no viral staff?"

"No Flemming staff. It was probably the most powerful one out there. If that was what we were up against, I would have told you to run and never look back. Anything else and we have a chance."

"What's a Flemming 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 basically screamed?" she said, looking bashful. "I couldn't help hearing what you said."

"You let her in," Shila said, "you explain things."

Paul nodded. His layperson's understanding would make him more relatable. "What you're holding is what 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 who want staves like this one, but they think that the more people have been absorbed by it, the more powerful it is. At first, we thought the epidemic was an attack on Doctor Merlin, but your story tells us they weren't interested in stopping with him. You saved a lot of people by taking the staff out of there."

She looked from him to Shila. "Magic is real? Doctor Merlin was..." Her chuckle was forced. "Merlin?"

"No," Shila said, just a Practitioner who happens to have the name of a famous fictitious wizard.

"Merlin isn't real?" Paul asked.

She glared at him. "Really?"

"You just told me Flemming was a Practitioner. My best friend teleports— that's another story," he told Nina at her stunned expression. "There's so many magical factions out there I am amazed no one outside of them actually knows you exist. So yeah, I thought Merlin was real."

She shook her head. "Fiction, like a lot of stuff people think is real."

"Alright," Paul said. "How do we deal with this?"

Shila looked at him, but it was Nina who put words to her expression.

"You want to try and stop the magical people with staves that can make an entire city sick?"

"No," Paul replied. "But if we weren't the only ones who'd worked out what's actually going on, I think it would have been dealt with, right?" He looked at Shila and she

nodded. “So, do you know which Family’s in charge of Denver? I know Thomas is terrified of being seen in Denver because of the Brislow guy, but it didn’t sound like he’s the one in charge.”

“Cormoran, but we can’t go to them.”

“Why not?”

He did his best not to let Nina’s stunned expression make him chuckle. She was out of her depth. He was only in up 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 don’t know anything about, let alone that Merlin was a Practitioner. Did Thomas never tell you we don’t exactly play nice with others?”

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

“And what do we tell the Cormorans when we go to them?” she demanded. “Hi, you have a group of insane wizards somewhere in your city, but we have no idea where they are hiding, and we don’t know what they’re using to make everyone sick, but hey, maybe you can do something about it?”

“Insane?” Nina asked, as if the idea was impossible.

“What do you call someone willing to sacrifice a whole fucking city just for a power-up?” Shila demanded. That caused the hare’s mouth to snap shut.

“What if we bring them the information on where they are?” Paul asked.

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

“By asking the guy for whom finding lost and hidden stuff is what he does.”

It was her turn to close her mouth with an audible snap.

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

Shila nodded. “We find Donal, he helps us figure out where the Chamber is and we go to 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.”

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

Nina straightened and for a moment she looked like someone able to take on the world, and almost immediately, he vanished under Shila’s unimpressed glare.

“You said I saved people when I tool Doctor Merlin’s staff from the clinic. I want to continue helping. I can’t just sit here and wait after finding out about all this.”

Shila looked like she’d argue. No, Paul decided, the pangolin looked ready to kick Nina to the curb, but then her expression shifted, and while the golden tiger didn’t know Shila that well, there were a lot of pranksters in the biotech and medical field and he’d see that expression often enough. The one that screamed I’m getting an idea and while it might not be the brightest one, it is certainly going to be interesting to make it happen.

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