

# Storyboard-7

Paul listened to Shila's complaints while watching their surroundings. She'd crafted a talisman out of code and put that on his phone too, so they should have been able to waltz into Denver with no more effort on their part. Instead, there had been three near encounters with National Guard soldiers where how much else was going on around them had more to do with the two of them not getting arrested.

Then, as they crossed through the crowds at the edge looking for a way to leave, or hoping for treatment, or food and water, they were two attempted mugging. People were desperate and while in some places that led to them banding together for support, in others, it shattered any sense of civility. A mix of running and Paul getting in a luck punch had allowed them to leave that layer for one deeper.

Here, the roads were deserted; the people stayed indoors and waiting, or leaving only for urgencies. Paul saw some of them at the windows, and he saw the shotguns and rifles, usually as they approached, as a warning to keep their distances.

With less to do to avoid altercations, Shila had had more time to complain and explain how it could be that her talisman wasn't working as well as it should. She put the blame squarely on the Chamber. Their presence had to mean they'd have someone in place that could interfere with her magic.

The way she explained it, the talisman didn't render them invisible. She'd need access to a few server farms for something that could bend the laws of physics to that level. They were invisible to cameras and any digital recorders. Those were well within what she could do, but people needed more. So she'd program more of a 'don't look here' kind of magic.

The problem, as Paul saw it, was that something like that had to only be as good as the level of attention people were willing to put into looking. On a normal day, he had no doubt it would be fine. People tended to be too wrapped up in their own lives. He guessed that even a police officer wouldn't pay attention to them unless they actively tried to get his attention.

But this wasn't a normal day. The National Guard was actively looking for anyone breaking the quarantine. And that meant in both directions. So they were more attentive. Then the people inside who could cause them troubles were looking for any opportunity to get a leg up on the situation. And those weren't worried about hurting them unless they could be hurt in return, it turned out.

Paul's fist still hurt, but at least it had paid off.

His primary concern was catching this sickness, even if Shila was confident they were safe. She'd put an antiviral talisman on his phone, and so long as didn't lose that, he'd be fine. When he'd asked for some details, she'd looked at him and said, "Magic."

Knowing magic was real didn't make that, as an answer, any more comforting than it would have been without the knowledge.

According to the news reports, further in, there was chaos again. The hospitals were swarmed by sick people and those believing they were sick and those looking to take advantage of all groups, but they wouldn't be going to any of those places.

"A car?" Paul asked, as they approached and abandoned one with the passenger door opened. "We can get there faster."

She shrugged. "The talisman's still on your phone, so you can get it started."

The problem proved to be the lack of a charge.

"Can that be part of what the Chamber's doing?" Paul asked after the fourth abandoned car without a charge.

"Depends what they're after. Preventing people from leaving will increase the strain on Merlin, but they have the National Guard for that. These people were probably just careless."

Paul nodded. Not everyone was lucky to have their garage equipped with wireless charging, and plugging the car in was a step even the most attentive driver could forget. It had happened to Paul a few times back in Minneapolis. His mother's garage only had one plug for both their cars. The apartment building by the university had come with wireless charging.

So they continued on foot.

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Finding Donal's house took a little longer than Paul expected. What he hadn't realized was that it wouldn't be under Thomas's name. His friend had complained loudly about Donal's inability to stay put after the event that had brought the two of them together. So he'd gotten him a house when the squirrel had returned to Denver.

He also didn't know Donal's last name.

Shila had finally found it, Hines, and with that, locating the house had been easy, and the walk uneventful. Getting in was... proving to be more difficult.

Donal wasn't in, and neither of them wanted to stay outside while they waited. The weather shouldn't be too cold even in Denver once the sun set, but there was no telling who would be about once darkness offered cover.

Shila was on her phone again after unlocking the digital lock and the door still refusing to open. She muttered something about how the place had more talisman security than her place, but she'd countered those, so she couldn't figure out what was keeping her from going in.

Paul walked around the house, and since she'd said all security, magical and other, had been turned off, he used a crowbar he found in the backyard to pry a window open. Inside, Paul navigated around bins of stuff to get out of what had to have been a guest room. There were more bins in the hall, and the living room was set up as a workspace, with a bench and tools. If the place had belonged to anyone other than a Practitioner, Paul would have called the owner a hoarder.

He flipped the deadbolt open and let Shila inside.

She glared at the purely mechanical lock, then looked at the bins around the workbench. "How does he find anything?" she mused.

“His thing’s lost stuff,” Paul replied, looking over the workbench. “So I’m guessing it’s just there when he needs it.” Bent nails, envelopes that looked to have been stepped on, a bottle of glue that hadn’t been dried properly.

“Not how it works,” she said.

“Any idea what he was working on? Are we going to stay here until he comes back?”

“I don’t do this stuff, so I can’t tell you what concept it might have been working with.” She headed deeper. “We might have to, but I’d rather find something in here telling us where he went.”

Paul followed her to the kitchen. “Can’t you program something to find him?”

“You’re asking me to find someone whose staff deals with lost stuff? Think that one through for a minute.”

“Alright, so he’s someone who can’t be found unless he wants to. According to Thomas, Donal does a lot of work with the homeless. Do you think one of the shelters would know where to find him?”

She looked through the cabinets, and Paul only saw more boxes of stuff in there. The fridge was empty.

“You sure he lives here?” Shila asked.

“The house is his,” Paul replied. “What he does with it, I have no idea.” The bedroom was small, and unlike the other spaces, free of random junk. “He occasionally sleeps here, at least.” The attached bathroom was likewise spotless.

The pangolin stood in the bedroom’s doorway pensive. “I didn’t believe Grant when he told me he’d found someone who’d crafted a staff on his own. We’re supposed to be a once in a century occurrence.” He looked in the hall. “Seeing this though...”

“That’s just statistics. And how well are those kept in the magical community? Especially one as loosely organized as the Practitioners?”

“Not going to take a dig at someone like Donal bursting my bubble of specialness?” the humor felt forced, especially since Paul hadn’t heard Shila utter one funny thing in the few days he’d known her.

“Won’t help anything, and by how you look, you’re doing enough of a job of that without me.” He paused, considering his next words. “Is the idea that there’s someone else out there who discovered magic without help hitting you that hard?”

“It shouldn’t,” She replied. “Never thought about it before Grant told me.” She forced a shrug. “And we have more important things to do. Like, find this guy,” she offered Paul pamphlets. “And you might be right about shelters. Those were under a box on the counter.”

They were for shelters and had been attached to posts with tape or staples. He wasn’t familiar with Denver, so he didn’t know how close together the addresses were, but the dates around the circled names were for the day the epidemic started.

“Is there a way he could find out what the chamber was planning?” Paul asked.

“No idea. Normally I’d say he’d have to be looking for it, but with him, I’m not sure if something would just end up on his lap. The dates could just be the days he was planning ongoing, and he hasn’t had the chance to make plans once problems started.”

“So, are we starting with those, and hoping—”

Someone knocked on the door. It was only loud enough to be noticed.

“Mister Hines?” a woman called. “Mister Hines, I was told you could help me.”

Shila caught his arm as Paul walked around her. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Going to open the door. She sounds scared.”

She rolled her eyes. “Looters.”

“Looters don’t knock or announce why they’re here.”

The woman called again.

“Are you really going to leave her out there?” Paul asked, and the look the pangolin gave him was answer enough. He pulled his arm out of her hand and went to the door. He checked the peephole and a white hare in a pale blue dress stood there, looking around nervously. She had something in her arms, but it was too low for Paul to make it out.

He opened the door, and she took a step back, startled, and brought the cane up between them. Then, as if realizing Paul meant her no harm, lowered it. It was metal, he noticed, before she asked, confused.

“Mister Hines?” she asked.

Paul shook his head. “We’re... friends of his. He’s out right now.” For an instant, he didn’t think she’d believe him. But then she nodded. That was good because Paul had no idea how he’d explain what he and Shila were doing in the house if pressed. “Come on in. Maybe we can help you instead?”

“We?” the hare asked as Paul stepped out of the way.

“Me and my friend, we’re—”

“What are you doing with Merlin’s staff?” Shila demanded, phone out, and a look that made it clear that if she didn’t like the answer, there was going to be trouble.

Paul looked at the metal cane, and now he noticed it was made of scalpels carefully welded together so that it could be used as a cane, while the edges still looked sharp enough to cut.

Okay, even if Shila hadn’t said it, it was unusual enough that Paul would have wondered if it was a staff now.