

Chapter 06

Paul looked out at the parking lot, arms resting on the steering wheel.

They were less than thirty miles from Denver when the traffic slowed to a crawl, and then they were forced into the parking lot of a mall by a National Guard. They'd been asked for medical credentials Shila couldn't produce, and they didn't care to look at the site proving who they were. They wanted the piece of plastic they could scan.

Without that, they were just civilians, and those parked.

"To repeat," the announcer on the radio said. "The CDC has confirmed that what they are dealing with is not the Black Death, as the rumors claims since the quarantine went up three days ago."

"Yes," a new voice said, a woman, sounding older, "the symptoms are severe and bear a resemblance, but we mapped the virus and it is not the Black Death."

"The announcement is good news and bad," the announcer said. "The Black Death has been studied for decades, so, while grave, it is a sickness we can fight. This new virus brings with it several unknowns that could result in untold death while the CDC's experts figure out how to deal with it. So, remember to take precautions. Wash your hands, wear a mask, and if you think you or someone you know is displaying symptoms, contact your emergency services. So long as we remain calm and work together, we will get through with this."

"Like anyone even fucking wants to do the right thing," Shila grumbled, typing on her phone. "Just bunch of baby screaming for mommy to come fix all the fucking things."

Paul shut the radio down. He hoped for people to do more than clamor for other to fix the problem. But one thing his history class had shown was that as a country, when it came to being responsible and doing the work that ensured emergencies resolved quickly and cleanly, his didn't have the best track record.

The lot wasn't as full as he'd expected, even if a lot of the cars in the lineup had simply turned around. Guards walked the perimeter of the parking lot. Unarmed, taking the time to talk with people, smiling. A group had even taken selfies with kids. But Paul suspected they were there because they expected someone to run the barricade.

News vans were lined up along the edge closest to the city, some of the large networks, as well as smaller, a few so small they didn't have names of networks letters on the sides.

Shila had hunkered down in her seat as soon as she'd noticed them, and Paul understood the reaction. While there was no way the Chamber could suspect they were headed to Denver, all it took was for one camera to catch sight of Shila and for that image to be uploaded as part of the broadcast, and if the Chamber had even basic recognition software looking at those feeds, things were going to become complicated for the two of them. And these days, all it took to have one of those put in place was a little money.

If there was one thing Paul had noticed about the magical people he knew, it was that they had far more than a little money. Even Thomas, who'd grown up solidly middle class with him, was now rich because of what his magic let him do.

Cameras were why they'd avoided the major roads and cities on the way here.

"No-no-no-no,"

"Breathe Shi—" He stop at her expression. It was panic, it was terror. "What—"

"Move," she ordered. "We have to leave. Drive now!"

He pulled from the spot and headed to one of the lot's exits.

The pangolin looked over her shoulder, keeping her head mostly behind the headrest before dropping. "The Chamber's here."

"How?" Paul fought the urge to look back. "You said you covered our tracks."

She looked at him, terrified.

She'd sounded confident her programs were enough. He couldn't imagine what it was like for her to realize there was someone out there strong enough to undercut her protection like this, again.

The guard stepped to the window as Paul stopped before the gate.

"We're going to head back west," Paul told her. "It doesn't sound like this is going to be over anytime soon."

The beaver looked in, pausing on Shila, who was still low in her seat, but didn't comment. "I have to inform you that we have the vehicle's tag, and that we have every road into the city guarded. If you're looking for another way in, you will be stopped and detained."

"I understand. We're just going to head back home."

She motioned to the giraffe by the gate, and they raised it. When they reached the road, another guard motioned them to the westbound lane.

"Did they see you?" he asked once they were on their way. If the Chamber got to this length to shut down Denver because of them, Paul wasn't sure where else they could go. There were cities where Society families were in charge, but other than the Richards, who he'd only had indirect contact with, he had no idea who and where they were. And no way to find out without contacting one of his friends.

"No. She was giving a report." She looked at her phone, typing and swiping.

Once they were out of sight of the mall, Paul pulled into a charging station, then next to a charger. They might as well get that taken care of while they work out what to do. Four National Guards were seated at a table by the fast food place attached to the convenience store, eating.

Shila showed him her phone when he sat back in the car after plugging it in. On it, a calico cat talked about the emergency. She was petite, in a blouse, and with her face fur trimmed in a way Paul thought straight men found appealing. He'd seen the style on girls at school.

"I'm not seeing it. Is the microphone her staff?"

She swiped, and symbols trailed her fingers. The attractive female in a blouse dissolved into a plain-looking calico dressed in the most garish coat he'd ever seen. There were so many colors on it, no one in their—
So many colors.

He stared at Shila. "Are you telling me the coat of many colors is a real thing?"

"How the fuck would I know that? I don't know where that thing's from. Ask Grant. He the vaunted know-it-all when it comes to staves. But if she's here, it means that they—"

"Are you sure she's here for you?" He handed the phone back.

"Who else would she be here for?"

"Donal is in Denver. He's a Practitioner. Do you think there are others?" The Society was everywhere, in the sense that there were enough families in it that any city worthy of the name was bound to have one business one of them owned. He didn't know how widespread the Practitioners were.

She opened her mouth, closed it, then looked toward the city. "Merlin."

"I'm going to guess that's not the one from the round table."

She nodded. "He's a doctor. A plague would be the perfect thing to draw him out. He was in Denver the last time I checked in on him. Attached himself to a private security company years ago as protection from the Chamber. But this... he won't be able to stay out of it. All the Chamber needs to do is have people around the hot spots and they'll get him."

"Can we help him?" Paul asked, then amended. "Should we? They'll want his staff, so if they capture him, is he in danger?"

"They can't get it unless they push him to apotheosis. He'll be dead," she snapped as he opened his mouth to ask for details. So that wasn't an ascension in the way he knew the word. "They can take his staff after that."

"Okay. Can we help him with the Chamber also after you? Can they get you to reach that apotheosis state too?"

"They already tried in San Francisco. That was why they attacked my house, to force me to push past my limits." She smiled. "But I was smarter. I have... what you'd call breakers in place. They blew the servers before I could reach my limit, which also is how I got out of there. It threw what they were going in shambles. I called you and out we went."

"So, if let me see if I understand how it worked. The Chamber cut you off from anyone who could help, then they stress you until you die."

"It's not death to me," she said, then added when Paul just stared at her. That kind of contradicted what she'd said before. "It's complicated"

He'd have to be okay with that for now. "But isolation is key to pushing you to that state? It's what

they'll do with this Doc Merlin here, right?"

"Probably."

"Then, the best way to keep you safe is to increase the number of allies around you. We get Donal. He's local, so he's going to know where the doctor is. That makes three Practitioners together against the Chamber. That's got to be better than each of you on your own, right?"

She nodded. It was filled with hesitation, but it was nod nonetheless.

"Good. Now please tell me my little speech got your imagination going, because I have no idea how we're going to get past the National Guard."