

Chapter 14

It worked.

Whatever Shila did, worked.

Paul had trouble wrapping his mind around it, because he'd come to realize, over years of living around magic people, was that magic was never the solution to their problems.

Throwing magic at a problem solved it just as much as throwing Crisper protein at a genetic problem. It solved nothing. Magic, like Crisper, was simply a tool. With the right knowledge, tools could be used to make impressive things happen, but tools had limits.

It didn't matter how much he knew about Crisper, Paul would never be able to build a house with it, and Magic couldn't change the world.

Only, Shila had done just that, and no one realized it.

"Five days ago," the announcer said, "in the wake of the strange computer malfunction that spread around the world, the sickness that had spread from Denver to the surrounding cities was... cured." The wolf looked distinctly uncomfortable saying that. "The CDC still hasn't released how they were able to reach all those people in the infected areas, but those affected no longer displayed any symptoms, and there has been no recorded recurrence since."

He was replaced with a scene in an emergency room, taken on a phone of families and people in hospital gowns hugging and crying and rejoicing amidst happy, but perplexed doctors.

"The event that preceded the ...cure," the wolf said, back on screen, "also hasn't been identified. It has been described, and I can attest to this first-hand, as every screen on any device that has a computer in it starting to glow, then get filled with that our John, our technology reporter, described as lines of code, except it wasn't code. During the minute and eighteen second the event lasted, those devices were unresponsive, then they returned to normal. Yesterday, this studio was contacted by an antics repair expert who forward us a digitized recording of the event. We apologize for the poor quality of the recording, but it was made on an ancient analog recorder the woman had been repairing."

The screen changed to that of static and a garbled voice. Paul made out movement, then the static diminished enough he made out a phone held before the camera and through the snow he saw lights and could be part of a game the person was playing, or indecipherable text or, probably anything anyone watching this imagined it being.

He paused the playback on an image of static through which the shapes of light reminded him of a tan pangolin looking at the same time annoyed and severe.

"Magic can't change the world," he whispered. How often had one of his friends recited that around him? Once or twice as an answer to Paul's theoretical questions. Why didn't they fix world hunger? Why hadn't one of the families or another faction intervened to stop the epidemic in Honduras?

Okay, they hadn't all been theoretical.

But that was always the answer. Magic can't change the world.

And he wasn't told that dismissively. When Olavo said it, there was a sense of tiredness. The kind that came from confronting an immutable fact that he wanted to be untrue so he could do something about the state of the world.

Except, it turned not to be immutable, if the person performing the magic was a Practitioner. If they were willing to pour the entirety of their being into the magic they were performing.

For the ultimate sacrifice, one of them could change the world.

"Then why didn't Merlin fix this?" He'd sacrificed himself just like Shila had, so had many of the

doctors in that clinic. Was it because the genetic staff was actively influencing the virus then? Had Nina somehow manipulated Merlin and the other doctors into sacrificing themselves while not getting any results? Or was it that Merlin's staff didn't give him a way to reach beyond his clinic?

"Or," he whispered, "he wasn't even trying to fix everything." What had Nina said? The boy was cured as if by magic. What if that was the sacrifice Merlin had been willing to do, his life for that one?

That was the story Paul decided to believe. The way he wanted to remember the man's sacrifice. He hadn't failed at saving Denver. He'd succeeded in saving his patient. [I took things in a slightly different direction in the end, let me know if you feel it still works]

He swiped the image away and, while looking through the other news stories, felt Donal's appreciative gaze on him. I ignored it in favor of a story where the still showed a calico cat in a beige suit, holding a microphone, but with an extremely colorful coat superimposed over it.

"Pamela Sanders is still wanted by the FBI," the vixen announcer said, "after the content of a cloud drive spilled with multiple law enforcement servers in the wake of the unusual computer event that took place a few days ago. The FBI became involved when blackmail material was discovered within the spilled contents." There was no mention of the colorful coat, or any oddities, about the woman.

The cabin shook, and Paul looked around at the other passengers. A few were grabbing onto their chair's armrest. A soft ding sounded.

"This is your captain speaking," a man said. "I just wanted to reassure you that small turbulences like what we just experienced are perfectly normal. If some of you need something to calm your nerves, don't hesitate to ask one of the attendants. Otherwise, we are still on schedule for our arrival at Reykjavik airport." When he spoke again, it was in what Paul figured was the language spoken in Iceland and he looked at the ended news video.

Had Shila targeted this Chamber woman while also ending the sickness? It should have been impossible, but then, so should her ending the sickness period when she was always saying how the physical wasn't her thing. Then, there was another report Paul had come across while looking for the residual effect of the sickness.

It had been text only, telling him how unimportant it had been considered in the middle of everything happening, but the picture of the hare who had been in the accident had made him pause. Then he'd located her name. Nina Halldi.

So it had been her real name, after all. Or one she had documentation for on her person. She'd been in a car accident. Unlike every other vehicle, also affected during the glitch, which had simply come to a slow stop, hers had veered out of control for now discernable reasons other than the glitch had happened.

There was no mention of Merlin's cane in the article.

Magic wasn't supposed to be so powerful the one person could do all this.

It was also not supposed to result in that pangolin being consumed by it.

It was possible to die from magical overexertion. Magic was powered by something that came from the person performing it. But it had been explained to him, when it'd brought out his worries about it happening to Thomas, if he teleported too much, that it was nearly impossible to have happened by accident. Even Thomas would fall unconscious from exhaustion before he could perform that final teleport. He'd have to overcome many safeguards built within people to force himself to make that happen.

He was never as simple as someone just deciding it was worth the sacrifice.

Or so he'd been told.

Paul glanced at Donal, who smiled at him. It was the kind of smile that said, 'I have an idea. It's a bad idea, but we're going to have fun until we're caught.'

The snack cart bumped into the squirrel's seat, startling him.

"I'm sorry about that," the steward said, motioning it back to the center of the aisle. "Can I offer you a beverage?"

"No, thank you."

Paul shook his head when the steward asked him. He wasn't paying airline rates for a coffee, can of soda, or even a bottle of water. He could wait until they landed to rehydrate.

That he was on a plane to Reykjavik, or anyone, for that matter, still felt odd. When Shila had said to give the staves to Grant, Paul had expected Donal to place a call, then go home while the squirrel waited for the kangaroo to find the time, among securing all the other staves, to come to Denver. Instead, Donal had informed him they couldn't wait, they had to leave immediately.

Paul could have returned to San Francisco. All he agreed to was helping Shila get away from the Chamber, and that was definitely over. But it had felt wrong to let Donal deal with this alone. And the squirrel had pointed out Grant should have a look at him. The kangaroo was the one of experience dealing with guys

suddenly finding themselves magical, after all.

And it wasn't like Paul had anything urgent waiting for him back home. His search for a job could wait until he was back, as could dealing with getting a new car. He'd need one of those, with every biotech company being outside the city proper.

Where was Dietrich planning on setting up his company? If it was within the city, that might be enough of an incentive to take the position and be able to take the bus to work.

And in the end, immediately had taken just under five days, and even then, Paul still wasn't quite over how it had happened. Neither he nor Donal had a passport, so he'd expected the squirrel to magic them through the airport security by ways of lost corridors and causing agents to be distracted while then slipped onto the plane.

Instead, there had been phone calls, three accidental encounters, and a good deed that resulted in both of them owning passports in good working order and tickets for the flight. The tickets were for coach, but Paul didn't mind that.

Donal still insisted he couldn't make anything happen with his staff, that it wasn't how it worked, but it seemed that 'lost and hidden things' included finding himself at the right place, at the right time, with the right items so someone would feel indebted to him.

The staves were in their possession. The Genetic on in a case in an overhead compartment, the brass knuckle one leaning between them, as Donal was using it as the cane it was fashioned to be, and the Shila's phone in one of the Squirrel's pocket.

That no one had even glanced at the cane while they walked through the airport, Paul attributed solidly to magic.

Donal was eying him again.

Hadn't the squirrel gotten any the night before? He'd come home with a woman, but Paul hadn't paid attention to what they'd done, or there in the house they had gone to.

Not that Donal was bad-looking. Somewhat on the thinner side, and a nice enough guy. But with moving about Denver to be in the right places to get the items the squirrel needed, to them encounter the people that would in the end result with them being on the plane hadn't left any time for them to sit down and talk. And while he owes the man for getting his memories back, Donal was still little more than an acquaintance, and that didn't work for Paul.

Once the staves were in Grant's possession, he and Donal could talk, get to know each other, see if they could be friends.

Paul focused on his phone. He couldn't call Donal out on what he was doing so long as it was just looking. He brought up the chat he and his friends used and looked over the threads. The usual plans for food, discussion about a genetic paper, who was available to fuck, one rating the San Francisco clubs. There was a mostly inactive thread about Thomas. It had been more active in the early days of Thomas working with Grant. Then he'd regale everyone on the thread with his adventures, but as things became busier, and gaining an understanding of how insecure the internet was from Shila, Thomas had shared fewer and fewer details until he hardly said anything there.

How much of the security his friends within the Society took for granted had been Shila's work? How much was magical? With her gone, how long until it failed?

He was writing a message warning his friends to be more careful about what they shared when he realized the Chamber might be spying on the chat. But would they? Did they know about Paul helping her? Did the Chamber have reason to think someone within the Society would talk about Shila? Thomas. They knew Thomas worked with her. They know about Roland and Niel, which meant they could know about any of the others.

He noticed a new thread, created on the day Shila sent the message to the hundreds of friends.

Niel and Roland were the most vocal in their demands to know what was going on, why they couldn't get in contact with the sender, who that was. Madoc was the one who eventually provided assurance everything was fine, that he'd had people look into it, and that the sender was someone who would look after Paul.

That comment made Paul smile. He wasn't sure who had told Madoc that, but if the rat had met the pangolin even once, he wouldn't think of her as someone who could take care of anyone.

Then he realized there was one person the information would freak out if she'd been included, and he breathed easier once he confirmed his mother wasn't included in the threat.

The tone of the thread was worry, but not to the point of mounting the kind of rescue expedition Roland had set in motion for Niel. That was the danger with being friends with guys who'd already been through adventures. It was easy for them to decide another adventure would solve this problem, too.

He accessed his resume since he still wasn't tired.

He looked at it for changes and improvement he could make. One of his recurring worry was that the lack of response from potential employer was because it wasn't written well enough. A new word here, a better one there.

Looking over the life experience section, he smiled. What would he put if he'd include what he'd just gone through? Helped a nice lady save the world from a magical plague? There was a way of insuring he was never hired.

He saved the few changed, but kept looking.

It felt wrong to just ignore what she'd done, and it had been a good life experience, overall.

And it wasn't like he had to update the file.

He wrote it, looked at it, made it better with a change, simpler with another, and settled one.

Helped a friend save the world from the plague.