

# Storyboard-9

Paul didn't know how he felt about Shila's plan to take over the staff behind the epidemic hitting Denver. She'd considered giving him Merlin's staff, but that one was aligned with medicine. A Doctor was better for it. The other staff had to be viral or genetic in nature, both lent themselves more to someone from the biotech field.

Pointing out he was specializing in nutrition and muscle development hadn't dampened her enthusiasm. She had a solution to a problem, and she was sticking with it. If they encountered the staff wielder, they were taking it from them, and Paul was using it to end this problem so they could go on with fixing hers.

How they were going to get the staff away from the current wielder if they encountered them?

She'd shrugged and said Paul could think of something by then.

Paul was hoping gloves were enough to keep a staff from doing whatever they did to the people who were supposed to use them because he had no interest in joining the magical community so directly.

"Are you sure we should be going in that direction?" Nina asked. "That's one of the denser population centers. It's going to mean more infected."

"Just keep your phone with you and you'll be fine," Shila replied.

Nina had been reluctant to let a stranger handle her phone, but in the end, she'd relented and now had the same anti-viral program in it that Paul had in his phone, as well as the 'look away' one. The hare looked around every so often, as if she had trouble believing it was why no one bothered them as they walked.

"Are you sure?" the hare asked.

"Girly, now that I know this problem is because of a staff, I can promise you that my app is going to keep you from catching it. I don't know genetics or virology, but I know magic. That's going to get undone before it gets anywhere close to us."

"And you're keeping it to yourself?" Nina asked, her tone a mix of surprise and accusation.

Paul stepped between the two as the pangolin rounded on the hare. "Nina. Magic isn't like in fairytales. It doesn't fix everything. It's a tool like any other and it needs to be powered. I'm sure that if it was within Shila's capability, she would do it."

"Of course," the hare said softly. "I'm sorry. It's just..."

Paul turned to look at Shila.

"I would," the pangolin said as if he was accusing her.

"I know."

As the density of people increased, so did the misery. Houses were marked as off-limits, people lined the sidewalks, most sick to one degree or another.

Shila avoided looking at them, Paul noticed, her expression miserable. Occasionally,

she took out her phone and worked on it, only to put it away in frustration.

“Nina,” he asked after another block of sick and people tending to the sick. “What’s the death rate?”

“What do you mean?” the hare asked.

“We’ve crossed nearly a dozen blocks and there’s a lot of sick, but I didn’t see one body. Or any indication bodies have been removed. I doubt there’s a working infrastructure able to deal with this level of sickness and death it causes left at this point.”

“I…” he became thoughtful. “I don’t remember anyone actually dying it this. I mean, without knowing what this is, there’s no real way to know for sure, but the few deaths we’ve had were of complications from the patient being sick. One of the main things attacked in the patient is their immune system, but even then, we didn’t see a lot of death. But we’re just one clinic. The news probably had a better picture of the overall situation.”

“The news didn’t say anything about deaths that I remember,” Paul said. “Shila?”

“The Chamber’s keeping anything from getting out.” She was looking at her phone again.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Why?”

“We saw one of them among the reporters, so there’s got to be a dozen. They’re like cockroaches. Os for why?” She raised her voice as Nina was about to say something. “Do I look like I have any idea how those people think?”

“Clearly not,” Nina said.

“Then don’t ask me about why they’re doing what they’re going.”

“I guess the likeliest reason is that they want to keep the other magical communities from realizing this isn’t a normal sickness,” Paul mused.

“That’s as likely as any other reason,” Shila replied. She pointed ahead, where people were standing in line in front of a building with a long table with food on it and people behind it. There were more than the homeless standing in the line, but they all looked miserable, even those behind the table.

“You’re the doctor,” Shila told Nina. “You ask them where Hines is.”

“Why?” the hare asked.

The pangolin let out an exasperated sigh as she stopped and turned. “Because we need to find him so we can—”

“I mean, why are we, as medical people, looking for him? I don’t expect them to question who we are, but if we tell them we’re doctors, aren’t they more likely to ask us to help with the sick there?”

“Maybe we can need his help in creating a census of the homeless population,” Paul offered when Shila couldn’t find anything. “You said he’s the go-to for the homeless, so that would make sense.”

“It’s what I’ve heard,” Nina said, not sounding certain. “It might be best if we’re just helping doctors. I don’t know if I can be more than a nurse.”

“So long as it gets us pointed in Hines’ direction. It works,” Shila said. He swiped her phone. “I’m going to drop the cloak, so be on your guard. Even this close to a large group, there might be people willing to mug us.”

Nina held Merlin's cane tight to her, but she followed, once Shila started walking again, without looking around for threats. Closer to the table, they were the ones getting the looks, suspicion, fear, glares.

Paul realized that as they bypassed the line, people worried they were cutting in front, or possibly here to shut it down. They hadn't seen any police presence yet. Was that because this area was quiet enough not to need them, or because they had been abandoned?

"Excuse me," Nina called to a black bear on the emaciated side, handing paper cups of steaming liquid from a tray behind her to people.

The bear took one look at them, and he called. "Gerald, tourists."

A bat stepped out of the building, and unlike the bear, she was muscular, but she looked even more exhausted. The effort to be civil was visible.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm Nina Haldi," the hare answered, her voice confident. "I'm Doctor Merlin's nurse. They are helping me. He sent me to locate Mister Donal Hines because—"

"Don?"

"Yes, we need to speak with him because he—"

"You'll probably find him in Lodo. We haven't had anyone here from there for a few days and when I mentioned that to him a few hours ago, he said he'd go check in on them. The odds are they're just well enough to not need our help, but you never know. This thing seems to go up and down without reason. Then there's the looters."

"Where's Lodo?" Shila demanded.

The bat looked at the pangolin and Paul stepped in since it looked like the brusqueness could be what caused the bat to tell them to fuck off.

"I'm sorry for her sharp tone," the golden tiger said. "We've been looking for a while and this is the first time we've had someone who's seen him. It's rather important we talk with him."

The bat took a few breaths before nodding. She pointed. "Take Champa to twenty-second and make a left. Once you hit the baseball field, you'll be in Lodo. From there, he could be anywhere."

Paul smiled. "Thank you."

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The baseball field turned out to be a small stadium with a group of healthy-looking, wealthy-looking, people keeping anyone from approaching. The weapons they carried kept any but the most determined from approaching, then having one of those shoved in their face sent them away quickly.

Paul had kept an eye on Nina as they walked by. As a nurse, she had to find this treatment of others appalling. But she didn't even look at it. She walked ahead, face neutral. She no longer even seemed to notice the people standing in doorways, or alleys. There had been a few fights as they traveled, Shila's cloak keeping them from being pulled in, but Nina had ignored them.

Or, Paul figured, she couldn't afford to notice them anymore. She'd already been through weeks of watching people suffer. He couldn't imagine lasting this long before it got

to be too much. It was something he's seen in the medical student at the university after long nights working the emergency room as part of their training.

He'd tried to help those he'd become friends with, and in the process had found out the best thing to do was to give them space until they were functional enough to appreciate the help.

Past the stadium, Paul had Shila drop the cloak long enough so he could go ask one of the healthier people about a squirrel going around looking after people. It took multiple tries before someone pointed them south, then it was even more before another sent them west. Not long after that, they found out that Donal had been in that area, but had done north not long before they arrived.

Shila's exasperated cursing finally gave way to hopeful grunts as they set on their way. Nina was... Nina. Or a numb Nina. She looked tired, but it seemed to be more physical than emotional. She'd have to have any emotional energy left for it to register.

She was going to need weeks of rest and possibly therapy to recuperate from this. He hoped she would. The person he'd met at Donal's house seemed to want to help as many as she could.

The sound of a fight ahead made Paul sigh. There had been too many of them, and while people didn't notice them, it was best to go around the block because not being noticed meant no one would try to avoid hitting them with thrown stuff.

"Isn't that a squirrel?" Nina said, seeming to come back to life.

She was right. In the middle of four people, a squirrel was trying to hold his own.

Shila cursed. "The Chamber beat us to him."

"No," Nina said.

"I don't think so," Paul said, hurrying to his help. They were in front of a shattered storefront with boxes littering the sidewalk. He figured Donal had found them looting the place and tried to stop them.

None of them reacted to Paul's presence until he grabbed one's arm and pulled him away, then all of them seemed surprised that he was there.

They got over that quickly enough, and Paul dodged a clumsy punch, throwing on in return and getting lucky. The rottweiler backedpedaled, hand to his bleeding muzzle. Paul sidestepped a swing, just in time, from a rabbit, then she was hit by a box thrown by Shila.

The looters realized they no longer had the advantage and ran.

"Wow," the squirrel said, straightening. "You guys have great timing." His jacket was old, and some of the clearly homemade restitching had ripped in the fight, but other than a cut on his cheek, he seemed okay. He smiled at Paul, taking a step forward.

Paul offered his hand. "It's good to see you again D—"

Instead of shaking his hand, the squirrel placed each on the side of the golden tiger's head and kissed him.

Kissed him hard.

Paul tensed as the tongue pushed past his lips. Then he had his hands on the other man's shoulder and pushed him away. He didn't know Donal anywhere near well enough to be okay with this.

The look of surprise and shock on Donal's face kept Paul from doing more than glaring.

"I have no idea where that came from," the squirrel said, raising his hands placatingly.

"I'm sure," Shila said. "You Hines?"

"I am," he looked at them, and when his gaze fell on the cane Nina held, his shoulders sagged. "This isn't going to be good news, is it?"

"That's going to depend entirely on how helpful you can be," Shila replied.