

PRAISE FOR ENTER THE JANITOR

“A fresh voice in urban fantasy and an original new hero. And after reading this novel, you might never again go to the bathroom alone....”

—Laura Resnick, author of
the *Esther Diamond* series

“It’s always a good sign when I close a book with a giggle. Enter the Janitor by Josh Vogt is a humorous contemporary fantasy that goes places and meets creatures you won’t expect and haven’t seen before. His protagonists are definitely not your standard fantasy heroes, nor their cause the usual fight between Good and Evil. Just when you think you’ve figured out the world, it twists again, landing you in a new place with new perils. Clever, well-written and a bunch of fun.”

—Jody Lynn Nye, bestselling fantasy
and science fiction author



The Cleaners
Book 1

ENTER
THE
JANITOR

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ENTER *THE* JANITOR

JOSH VOGT



WordFire Press
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THE CLEANERS: ENTER THE JANITOR

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CHAPTER ONE

Ben shuffled into the college library, tugging his squeaky janitorial cart along like a coffin-on-wheels. The moment he entered the place, his right arm started aching, adding a small, but significant voice to the chorus of twinges, knotted muscles, and scars that composed his aging body.

Ignoring this as best he could, he took a big whiff of the place. He snorted and shook his head, gray ponytail flapping.

At the noise, heads popped up from textbooks and tablets as students stared his way. Ben gave them his best grumpy grandpa look until they turned back to their books. A study group that had circled up chairs in the center of the room resumed murmuring calculus equations at each other, which might as well have been a foreign language to Ben.

Resisting the urge to massage his arm, he made eye contact with the young man behind the main desk. Jason, the work-study for the evening, flashed a relieved smile as he lurched out of his chair and headed the janitor's way.

Ben tugged at his blue jumpsuit so his name, threaded in red on the left breast, displayed prominently. The spray bottle hanging

on his belt quivered as the water sloshed within. Ben scowled and slapped it.

“Shaddup,” he whispered. “I can handle this.”

Jason arrived, glancing around as if afraid of angering some librarian deity. His combed hair and tucked polo shirt made him look like the chrysalis version of a politician, close to breaking out of the cocoon into full suit-and-smirk mode.

“If I’d known anyone was coming, I would’ve established quarantine,” he said.

Ben cleared his throat with the subtlety of a garbage disposal. “If I’d known any winnin’ lotto numbers, I woulda retired years ago. What’s your point?”

Flushing, Jason caught the janitor’s arm. Ben let himself be guided to one side, but once they got out of earshot, he grumbled at the younger man.

“Leggo of my arm. The suit don’t block everythin’.”

Jason snatched his hand back. “I—er. Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh.’ And here I thought you was one of the smarter recruits.”

“Should I ... uh ...” Jason wiped his hand on his shirt.

“If you caught anythin’, it wouldn’t matter if you stuck it in boilin’ water until the skin came off. Just don’t grope me again.”

“The Board processed my report?” Jason asked.

“Yuppers. Figured it was worth a look.”

Jason squinted in doubt. “And they sent you?”

Ben pushed his sagging cheeks up and leaned in. “You wanted someone prettier? Want me to go steal some lipstick from the girls’ dorm and get gussied?”

Jason coughed and backed up a step. “Sorry, I just ... I waited a while to call in. You know how HQ gets if you file too many false alarms. Wasn’t sure if I actually sensed anything or was just being paranoid.”

Ben rolled his bowed shoulders, which crackled like bubble wrap. “What’re we dealin’ with?”

“The vents keep rumbling,” Jason nodded at a nearby grille, “and I’ve noticed above-average grime buildup. Definitely Corruption of some sort. Could be coming in from the air ducts. Maybe a muttermite infestation.”

Ben sniffed. “Naw. You trainees are gettin’ sloppy. Muttermites ain’t never made this kinda stink.”

Jason’s nose wrinkled. “I haven’t smelled anything.”

“That’s ’cause you ain’t an old hound dog like me. You couldn’t sniff out Corruption if bile got pumped straight up your blowholes.”

The water in the spray bottle sloshed again.

“Hmm.” Ben nodded. “Good idea.”

Jason eyed the water as it spun. “Is that ... Carl?”

“You betcha.” Ben patted the bottle. “And no. You ain’t gonna hold him, pet him, snuggle, or take a sip.”

“I wasn’t going to—”

“Hush it. Lemme concentrate.”

He shut his eyes to fix on his prey. He blanked out the hushed chatter of the students, the hum of air conditioning, and the clack of fingernails over keyboards. He pushed past every distraction until ...

The subtle foulness in the air congealed into an olfactory hook that set in his nose and jerked him toward the source of Corruption. Along with this came the sound of leather being dragged over rusty metal, and a messy snuffling, like a dog gobbling up fresh goose droppings.

Ben cocked his head at the bathrooms. “We got ourselves a blot-hound nested in the pipes.”

Jason paled. “But there haven’t been any suicides. They leave pretty distinctive trails, too. I’m sure I would’ve noticed. And if it has a nest, that’s even worse. They always fight hardest against threats to claimed territory and—”

Ben sighed. “Are you tryin’ to be helpful or just make yourself look smart?”

Jason stuck his chest out. “I’ve been studying. Almost ready to test for active field duty.”

“Studyin’. Heh.” Ben smirked. “Lemme fill you in on a company secret, kid. With the Cleaners, you don’t learn through information. You learn through action. Gotten any of that lately?”

“I’m ... not sure you mean it that way.”

He clapped the trainee on the shoulder. “Don’t think about it too hard. After all, I’m just a geezer here to get the job done.”

“What should we do?”

“We? Nuh-uh. I got this. You plant your butt back behind that desk and keep clear.”

“Sir, I’ve been ready for this for a year now.”

“If you think that, then you sure as shootin’ ain’t ready yet.”

Jason’s face fell.

Ben scratched his arm, which itched where the kid had grabbed it. “You really wanna be useful?”

“Please. Anything.”

“Then go get me a sign that says the bathrooms are closed. That’ll give me time to check things out and see if there’s somewhere to fit you in. Anyone in either of them now?”

“Don’t think so,” Jason said. “I’ll get a sign up, but—”

A growl wavered out from the women’s bathroom, loud enough to perk up several students who glanced about in confusion. Ben’s neck hairs prickled, and Jason’s eyes widened.

The librarian wiped at a trickle of sweat that escaped a trimmed sideburn. “Uh . . . are you sure you don’t need any help?”

Ben snorted. “Kiddin’? I’ve been moppin’ up Scum since before you started shavin’.”

A grimace. “Right. Guess I’ll . . . get that sign and then alert the scrub-team.”

“You do that.” Ben plodded back to his cart and hefted a plunger. “Ain’t gonna take more than ten, mebbe twenty minutes.”

The spray bottle gurgled.

Jason scowled at it. “Does he know I understand him?”

“Course he does,” Ben said. “He wouldn’t have said it, otherwise.”

“Well, he doesn’t have to be so insulting.”

The water slopped about, making chuckling noises.

After Jason left, Ben nudged the cart into motion with a knee.

As he maneuvered it between a bookshelf and coffee table, a slender female student burst through the double doors of a side hall. She wore black leather gloves and a white headband pinned frizzy red hair behind her ears. Wide-eyed, she peered around the room until she spotted the calculus study group. She raised a finger in the universal *just a minute* sign. Adjusting her backpack, she bolted through the room.

Ben's blood chilled as he realized she was aimed for the women's restroom. He flung the plunger at her back in a desperate attempt to stop her. However, she slipped into the bathroom, and the tool bounced off the door as it slapped closed.



Something thumped against the door, but Dani ignored it as she tossed her backpack onto the counter. She fumbled in the main pouch and hauled out her jumbo bottle of sanitation gel.

In her haste to make it to the study group, she'd bumped into two people on the way. Two! Who knew what their hygienic standards were? When had they showered last? Did they even own toothbrushes? One had awful halitosis, and had huffed an apology in her face as she shoved past, trying to control her rising panic.

She tugged her gloves off and pinched them under one arm. Then she pumped double-handfuls of gel and slathered it over her hands and forearms. The cutting odor of alcohol filled the restroom. Her panic subsided as the fumes surrounded her, a protective shield against a filthy world.

As the gel evaporated, she envisioned it taking bacteria and dirt with it. Vapors singed her nose, but she breathed deep. Clean body, clean mind. She had to remain vigilant, otherwise who knew what germs might hitch a ride on her skin and then burrow deep? A shudder rippled through her as she counted off possibilities: *Staphylococcus*. *Streptococcus*. *Escherichia coli*. Oh, god! What if she'd contracted *Clostridium difficile*? Should she schedule a doctor's appointment? Should she—

The door banged open behind her. She shrieked and whirled about as a tall, elderly janitor barged in, waving a plunger like a sword.

"Aren't you supposed to knock?" she cried. "I could've been—"

She dodged as his cart almost ran her over. It rammed into a stall and soapy water sloshed out of the bucket.

"Hustle outta here, missy," he said, pursuing his equipment. She pulled back against the sink to avoid touching as he shouldered by. "We're closin' the place down for a lil' maintenance."

“C-close? But—” Dani hadn’t finished her self-assessment. “I need a few minutes, okay? I’ve got an emergency of my own.”

She squeezed her thighs together, faking the urgent need to pee. As she did, her bladder alerted her brain that it could actually use some relief. She stifled a groan. Using a public restroom would tack another ten minutes onto her routine, not counting prep-work to make sure the toilet was clean enough. Had she brought enough wet-wipes?

Grabbing her backpack, she edged toward the nearest stall, but balked as he barred the way with an arm.

“Whoa, hey there.” His craggy smile accentuated the bags under his dark blue eyes. Oh god, was there *dirt* in his wrinkles? “Lemme rephrase. Nasty case of pipes backin’ up in here. Gotta shut ’er down before things go Old Faithful. If you don’t wanna flood of piss all over your shoes, you need to leave. Now.”

Tasting bile, Dani considered retreating. But she couldn’t leave without finishing her routine. She just ... couldn’t. He had to be exaggerating. If it was that bad, they would’ve had signs up and cordoned the place off.

“Look, gramps, I’ll be quick. Just a minute or two so I don’t wet myself.”

“Nothin’ doin’. Time to build a little character, princess. Get outta here and lemme do my job, a’ight?”

She sniffed. “Riding bikes builds character. I am not getting a bladder infection because you want to get back to reading porn in the janitor’s closet.”

He eyed her, grinning for some reason. His brown-streaked teeth made her stomach roil, and his breath had a tinge of spoiled meat.

“I ain’t gonna argue about this, princess.” He snatched a toilet brush off his cart and prodded her stomach. “Outcha go. Shoo.”

She yelped and hopped back. What was he doing? He used that thing to clean up after people ... after they ... She couldn’t complete the thought. He kept jabbing at her while she danced and dodged.

“What—hey—stop!”

A cattle prod would’ve been less of a deterrent. Her gloves fell to the floor as she jumped away from a vicious thrust. She thought of screaming for help, but what good would that do?

At last, she bumped back against the door. How many greasy handprints had she just come in contact with? How many people washed their hands before leaving? Screw study group. She needed a steaming shower and a change of clothes before she lost her mind.

The janitor came on, grinning like a jester monkey. She tried to kick the brush out of his hand, but he pulled away.

“Ah-ah.” He flicked the brush in reprimand.

Droplets hit her forehead, and she stiffened. Code Red exposure. She almost wiped the vile liquid off, but then realized her hands remained exposed. Her gloves. Where were her gloves? Her gel remained on the sink, taunting her. She reached for it even as the distance increased.

“No. Wait ...”

The janitor closed the gap. “There’s more’n one set of bathrooms ’round, ain’t there?” A final jab of the brush had her out in the library again. “Or there’s some comfy bushes outside, if you got the gumption.”

She bristled. “Now hold on—”

The door slammed in her face.



Ben shoved his cart against the door and leaned on it, sighing. Where was Jason with those Purity-forsaken signs?

He studied the place while ignoring the shrill voice outside. The women’s room had four stalls and three sinks, walls done in blue and white tile, and a frosted glass window at the far end. Halogen lights gleamed off the fixtures.

Making sure the cart jammed the door, he double-checked his inventory. Mop with the metal-tipped handle? Check. Squeegee with a razor edge? Honed and ready. Radio? Charged. After hefting his mop, he walked by each stall, letting the prickling in his right arm escalate into a burning sensation.

Nothing drew him to any of the toilets, so he returned to the sinks and crouched to check under the counter.

The middle sink turned out to be the creature’s hidey-hole. The S-shaped pipe had ruptured halfway down, jagged metal poking outward while black-green ooze dribbled from the hole. Ben gripped

his mop like a staff as he kicked at the puddle of inky glop spreading beneath the break. The sulfur stink made his nostrils flare.

“I know you’re in there, you cruddy little bugger.”

He spat into the bucket of soapy water hanging off the cart. The saliva sizzled as it hit the surface, and he glared at the puff of steam. Using the squeegee, he scooped up a dribble of the black muck and dunked it into the water as well. More foul smoke rose from the tool, which emerged clean.

Carl gurgled in his bottle. Ben stuck the squeegee away and grabbed a rag.

“Yeah, well, you gonna be a tattle-tale? Not like they can do anythin’.”

The water formed a brief vortex.

Ben flicked the bottle. “Have a little faith, buddy. If it gets any worse, they’ll just kill me and burn the corpse. Problem solved. Everybody goes home happy.”

He whacked the mop handle against the pipe. A spark leaped from the metal grip and shot an electric spiral down the copper length. A growl reverberated within the wall where the pipe buried itself in the concrete.

“Gotcha.”

Without taking his gaze off the hole, Ben unzipped a breast pocket and pulled out a vial of bleach. He soaked the rag with this and wiped around both ends of the broken pipe. The muck clinging to the metal bubbled away in seconds until a shining copper ring capped the edges.

Another dribble of bleach went into the bucket. He plunged the mop into this and stirred. As he pulled it out, the solution sprayed across the black puddle. Wherever drops landed, steam rose and left the floor spotless.

Ben fought the urge to scratch his arm, which now burned up to the shoulder. He eased through several breaths, distancing himself from the pain. He shut out the sweat slicking his back, the electric buzz of the lights, and the raised voices from outside until only he and the broken pipe existed.

Drawing the mop back like a golf club, he prepared to swing.



Dani hugged herself and tried not to move. She'd never felt more exposed—not even on that night when Tim, her first—and last—college boyfriend, had coaxed her into that disastrous attempt at sex. She'd ended up missing classes for a week.

Never. Again.

She tried to ignore the stares of her fellow students. She knew her reputation as the “campus clean freak.” So what? She couldn't comprehend how others wallowed in germs all the time. Didn't they know eighty percent of infections spread through personal contact? Didn't they know library desks had more than four hundred times the bacteria of a toilet?

As her thoughts circled back to bathrooms, her fear switched to fury, and she imagined several sensitive places where the janitor could go stick his toilet brush. How dare he treat her that way? He, above all people, should know the importance of sanitation, and yet he'd been the rudest, crudest human being she'd ever encountered. Even the smell of him lingered like a dog fart.

She gritted her teeth as she considered her options. The nearest women's restroom sat on the far end of the building, and her full bladder might not survive the sprint—not to mention the warzone of contamination she'd be running through without protection. Use the guys' restroom here? Women's restrooms were bad enough. But her bladder made the situation clear. Relief first. Then damage control.

She turned to that door right as the librarian locked it and hung a sign on the knob. He didn't meet her eyes as he mumbled, “Sorry. Closed for maintenance.”

She stopped just shy of grabbing him. Instead, she tore her headband off and threw it at the librarian, who ducked as it spun over his head.

“Are you kidding?” she asked through clenched teeth. “Come on. I just need, like, ten seconds.”

With a rueful shrug, he returned to his desk. Moments later he spoke in low tones on a handheld radio.

Dani raked fingers through her hair, silently cursing as she tugged a few snarls. This couldn't be happening. How had things spiraled out of control so fast?

She forced her spine straight and made fists. No. She refused to let herself be bullied. She needed her gloves. Her gel and wipes. She couldn't go anywhere without them. What was the janitor going to do? Have her arrested for retrieving personal property?

She glowered at the women's room door. The thought of touching the handle set off mental sirens, but it'd be temporary exposure. Once she got her stuff back, everything would be okay. She could do this. She had to.

As she reached out, a screech echoed from within the restroom.

She paused. That didn't sound like any kind of plunging or toilet-scrubbing. Her frown deepened. What was this geezer up to? A push opened the door an inch, but the janitor's cart blocked anything more.

Screw this. With a wince, she lowered her shoulder and shoved.



Another growl shuddered up from the pipe, liquid and menacing. As Ben checked the cleansing ward he'd set up around the exit hole, someone thumped against the door.

"Keep your panties on," he shouted. "Just a few more minutes."

He whacked the pipe with the mop. Every strike sent sparks flying and a musical chime rang out. Each note melded with the others until the pipe and the wall around it vibrated with a pure tone.

Discordant howls rose in chorus to this. Ben tensed, waiting for his quarry to emerge. One hand went to the spray bottle.

The door burst open behind him. His cart skittered to one side and the redhead stumbled in, almost falling on her face.

Ben swore. "For Purity's sake! I toldja to get lost."

She glared at him with bright green eyes as the door swung shut behind her. "Keep your diaper on. I need my backpack."

He moved to shove her back out. "Go! This ain't—" A snarl warned him. He whirled and lashed out with the business end of the mop.

In that instant of spinning and striking, the beast lunged from the six-inch pipe opening. A dark form swelled to the size of a

mastiff, looking like a mad scientist's experiment in mating snakes and hounds. Muscled forelegs reached for Ben's face with obsidian claws that dripped venom. Purple and blue scales covered the sinuous body. Fangs extended; nostrils and yellow eyes flared.

The mop connected. Bleach water sizzled against the creature's skin as the impact redirected the beast past the girl's legs. It smacked into the wall and tiles cracked.

The girl shrieked and jumped aside, knocking Ben's cart over. Water sloshed everywhere.

The blot-hound scabbled upright. After shaking like a wet dog, the beast opened its maw as if to howl. Instead, it vomited a stringy black mass at the redhead. The sputum slapped her against the wall beside the door, where she stuck fast, feet dangling a few inches above the floor.

She writhed, eyes bugging, and keened, "Ohgodohgodohgod-ohgod ..."

The blot-hound hunched, but Ben stepped in as it lunged. He caught it across the spine and slammed it to the ground, where it thrashed. Claws raked the legs of his jumpsuit but failed to shred the material.

Ben plunged the mop into the beast's body, aiming for the core of Corruption that enlivened it. When the mop connected with a hard ball in the blot-hound's chest, he twisted the handle and sent another surge of energy through it. Cloth strands twined around the ball and he wrenched upward, drawing the core out as it trailed black ichor.

The blot-hound screeched and kicked before going limp. Eyes dulled, its form began to ooze into the floor. Ben crushed the core beneath a heel and then waited until the trembling in his arms faded before going to the girl.

She stared, teeth chattering. "Wh ... who are you? What was that ... th-thing? Is it infectious?"

"You're in college and can't even read?" He tapped the name threaded on his uniform. "I'm Ben. And that was somethin' you wouldn't have had to worry about if you'd stayed out like I toldja."

A splash of bleach water dissolved the sludge pinning her to the wall, and she dropped to her knees. Wet blotches stained her pant legs and crotch, but Ben pretended not to notice.

She huddled in on herself, shoulders heaving as she came dangerously close to hyperventilating. Ben sighed and leaned on the mop as the effort of eradicating the blot-hound caught up with his failing body.

“Don’tcha worry. The scrub-team’ll get here soon to give your memories a nice hose-down. By the time they’re done, you won’t even remember me. Ain’t that a relief?”

She blinked up at him, and he recognized the distant look people got when events didn’t align with their neat and tidy version of reality.

“Are you some sort of ... crazy person?” she asked. “Please tell me it isn’t contagious.”

Ben grinned. “Crazy is the easiest explanation, ain’t it? Run with that and you’ll be just fine.” He frowned and flexed his right arm, which continued to burn. Why hadn’t the pain faded?

Shouts came from out in the library, along with chairs being overturned and feet thumping. The scuffle in the bathroom hadn’t gone unnoticed. Jason had better be running interference.

The girl whimpered and dropped to her butt, trembling.

Ben shook his head. “Look, princess, I ain’t gonna hurt you. I’m the good type of crazy—”

A scraping noise jerked him around in alarm. Yellow light flared in the blot-hound’s eyes as it clawed up, standing twice as tall as before, reformed legs knotted with muscle. The head rose, now as big as Ben’s torso and sporting slavering fangs. As the blot-hound fixed on him, a hungry growl made his guts quiver.

“Oh, cleanse my colon.” He snatched the radio from his toppled cart and hollered into it. “Francis, I need backup. Now!”

CHAPTER

Two

The radio sputtered and the red power light flickered like a parting wink from the Devil. Cursing, Ben swept the mop along as he ran back and forth as fast as his arthritic knees allowed.

Carl splashed in the spray bottle, making it sway on his belt.

Ben grunted. “Shaddup. This is—” He skidded on a puddle and avoided face-planting by bracing on the mop. The tip jammed into his chest, and he wheezed. “I got it ... under control.”

The water made a spitting noise.

“Yes, I’m sure!”

Regaining his balance, he slapped the mop on the floor and activated the quarantine spell. All the spilled water from his cart flowed together and formed an inch-high band from one side of the bathroom to the other. He knelt and pressed a hand into this, infusing it with raw willpower. The effort left him shaking, but he forced himself to straighten and aimed the mop at the blot-hound across the boundary.

“All right, you sorry excuse for an overgrown tar pit. Think you can tussle with me?”

When the blot-hound didn't move right away, Ben worked up a wad of phlegm and hacked it at the creature. It bit the snot out of mid-air. A purple tongue slithered over its lips and it peered curiously at Ben.

He scowled. "That was s'posed to be an insult, not a snack."

The blot-hound slunk forward and tested the barrier with a paw. The water sizzled against its skin, but the beast didn't relent. It pushed its head further, making it flatten like a mime's hand against an invisible pane of glass.

Ben clenched his jaw, readying. Once the beast set a second paw in the water, he stuck the sparking tip of the mop handle into the band and released a charge.

Electric arcs writhed across the hound's body. It howled, a bowel-trembling noise that scraped over Ben's ears. Off to one side, the redhead clamped hands over her ears and writhed, but he kept his hands on the mop, channeling energy down through it.

With a final surge, the blot-hound crashed its bulk over the swath of water. Its size diminished by a quarter as it forced its way across, but the power Ben had invested in the barrier dissipated and only left the blot-beast stunned.

He stared in disbelief. Only when Carl made the spray bottle rock did he snap out of the shock.

"I ain't gettin' paid enough for this."

As he reached for the bottle, the blot-hound shook itself and lurched forward. It knocked him aside like a bulldozer putting a Tonka truck in its place. His head smacked against the wall and the mop flew from his hands.

He dropped flat. The room danced for a moment, but steadied just as the blot-hound's maw yawned above his face. Maybe letting it get a taste of him hadn't been the wisest thing.

The door flew open, and Jason rushed in.

"Sure you don't need any help?" He froze and gaped at the beast.

Students crowded behind the librarian, craning their necks to see inside. As soon as they got a peek at the bathroom monstrosity, however, everyone screamed and bolted. The blot-hound grunted and raised its head, discarding Ben for fresher meat.

Jason kicked the door shut behind him. He grabbed up the plunger from the fallen cart and shook it at the beast. “A-all right ... J-just you and ... me. I’m n-not going to let you h-hurt anyone!”

The blot-hound roared and charged. Jason stepped forward and swung the tool. The beast ducked the blow. A paw lashed out, raking the man’s throat into giblets. The plunger fell from limp fingers as he toppled into the girl’s lap, eyes blank, shirt stained crimson.



Dani screamed as she shoved the body away. Hot blood on her hands. Her clothes. Oh god. This couldn’t be real. As she fought to keep from vomiting, her mind resorted to analyzing potential threats.

Lyme Disease. Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. Toxoplasmosis. Too many variables. She had to find out who this guy was. Get his medical records.

Her vision swam as nausea rammed up her throat. When her sight cleared, the bathroom door had splintered off its hinges beneath the beast’s charge. Beyond this, the monster pillaged the library, toppling shelves onto students and shattering tables. Screams echoed alongside cracking wood and brick.

Hepatitis B. Hepatitis C. Cryoglobulinemia.

The janitor—whoever and whatever he really was—lay dazed beside her. Blood oozed from a gash in his scalp. He clutched one of his arms and muttered something about restocking toilet paper rolls.

She got to her knees and crawled over to him. He had to stop this ... thing. This monster. But she couldn’t bring herself to actually touch him, to try and shake him back to awareness.

Malaria. HIV. AIDS.

His mop lay by her, though. She picked it up—god, a *wooden* handle—and reached over to poke him with it.

“Mister ... can you ... mister, please—”

He jerked upright as if she’d hit him with defibrillator paddles. He grabbed the mop and yanked it over, pulling her with it. She fell forward and planted palms in the brackish water that coated the floor. Her mind cycled to water-borne contaminants.

Giardia. Amoebiasis. Botulism.

The janitor looked all around, as if getting his bearings. He frowned at her, and then the young man's body snagged his attention. His shoulders and face sagged.

"Aw, kid. I toldja to leave it be ..." He struggled to his feet, groaning the whole way. "Ready to work some unpaid overtime, buddy?"

Dani stared up at him. "What?"

"Not talkin' to you, princess." He cocked his head. "I know. Probably. But it's our job, ain't it?"

Oh, he was a Grade A lunatic, for sure.

He stepped past and grabbed her bottle of gel off the counter. "Can I borrow this?"

"No!"

"Thanks."

She snatched at it, desperate to pour the contents over her head. Considering all she'd been exposed to—*HGV. Chagas diseases. HHV-8*—it might already be too late, but her sanity demanded she salvage what she could.

He moved out of reach, though, and unscrewed the cap. Heading to the doorway, he squeezed gobs of gel out to coat the outside of the bottle as well as his hands. Then he leaned over the threshold and shouted.

"Hey, tall, dark, and ugly. Catch!"

He lobbed the bottle. There came a squelch and a yowl of pain. The janitor plodded out, mop at the ready, leaving Dani frozen on all fours.

What the hell was happening? Janitors duking it out with pipe-monsters? It had to be a hallucination. Or she'd died and this was her private hell. Both were preferable options.

She tried to find a clean corner to crawl into, but contamination taunted her everywhere she looked. Only the sink counter remained untouched by the blood, dirty water, and muck.

Her skin buzzed, and she felt as if her mind strained against the confines of her skull. A bubble of energy surrounded her, a crackling field of power fueled by her horror and dismay. Was she going insane?

Even as she fought to regain control, the sensation grew until she felt like a balloon about to burst. She shook as a foreign power took

control. Her bones felt aflame. Coherent thought flew apart as her mind seethed with new sensations. Faint air currents cut over her skin like hot razors, while the tiles chilled her as if carved from ice.

An enormous, invisible hand grabbed her by the spine and lifted her out of her body so she viewed it from above. Glowing lines spread out from her hands and into the floor. As they snaked along, her senses followed and formed a vision of what occurred in the next room.

Vibrations rippled out from the janitor's feet as he ran at the beast. She saw through the light bulbs as he yanked the spray bottle off his hip and squeezed the trigger. Water squirted but didn't disperse. Instead, the stream consolidated into a four-foot liquid whip that snapped through the air. More water flowed over the bottle and sealed it to his hand.

The harsh reek of the beast stabbed her sinuses like a rusty blade. She tried to recoil, fearing infection even in this disembodied form, but the possessing energy forced her to watch. A portion of the creature's head looked eaten away as if by acid.

The janitor charged in and lashed the water-whip like a geriatric Indiana Jones. The watery cord wrapped around the beast's hind leg. It tightened, sliced the limb off at the joint, and wrenched it away.

The beast yowled and collapsed mid-lunge. But it dragged itself around and snapped at the janitor with a maw that put a shark to shame.

The janitor lurched aside while grabbing the tip of his whip and bending it to touch itself. The cord blended into a noose which he snapped over the creature's head and cinched tight. When the beast jerked forward, however, it pulled the janitor against its sloppy backside. The hand holding the mop sank an inch into its hide, and steam erupted from the spot.

Bellowing, the man yanked his hand free and stabbed the metal tip of the mop handle into the beast's back. Using the mop and water-whip as leverage, he hauled himself up onto its torso. The creature reared and threw him off.

Dani had the despairing realization that the janitor would lose this struggle—and once he fell, the entire college would be at the beast's mercy. She clutched for anything she could do while trying to make sense of her new perceptions.

To her elevated mind, the creature appeared as a pulsing, infected wound in the center of reality. A corruption to be scrubbed out of existence. This monster caused all this horribleness. It had to be destroyed. Cleansed.

She realized she could sense other elements as well. The water pipes coursing through the walls. The air churning through the ducts. The electricity racing through the wiring. All of it just needing a push.

The unseen hand dropped her back into her body, where serpents of flame and ice coiled around her spine. She writhed with power that demanded to be unleashed, squeezing until she gave in and turned it loose—

Her head snapped back. Her furious scream echoed further than the walls should've allowed. The power rushed out of her to scour the bathroom and library clean.

Every electrical socket in the library spouted fire. Flames raced across the carpet and turned shelves to ash in seconds. They ate up the walls and scorched the ceiling black. Any remaining students fled, some with smoking hair and clothes.

A tremor shook the building. The fire alarm went off, flashing yellow lights around the room. With a grinding noise, the carpeted floor split beneath the beast's remaining legs. It gripped the edges to keep from plummeting into the crevasse Dani had summoned. The cool smell of wet earth wafted up as the ground shook.

The janitor tugged hard on the noose from the side, trying to tumble the beast into the hole.

Energy continued to pour out of Dani. Her body bucked as her eyes turned up in their sockets, yet somehow she remained aware of everything around her.

The ceiling sprinklers broke open and waterspouts curved to strike the beast from every side. The streams hit with the force of a dozen fire hoses and shredded its inky skin. As its size diminished under the blast, the beast made a last desperate lunge to break free. Another tremor shook the ground and widened the crack.

Screeching, the beast was swept into the fissure. The floor snapped closed with a squish, and black ooze traced the crack left behind.

From one heartbeat to the next, the energy vanished. Dani's mind and body floated free for a few precious seconds. Then

exhaustion bear-hugged her and squeezed out the last burps of her strength. Her cheek slapped the floor. She maintained just enough presence of mind to keep her mouth clamped tight against the filth she lay in. Out in the library, the ongoing spray from the sprinklers warred with the flames eating up the desks, shelves, and books.

A pop of light, like a camera flash, momentarily blinded her. The bathroom mirror shimmered and brightened into a rectangle of sunlight. Dani shaded her eyes with a heavy arm as a figure strode through the glass.

The glow faded but the newcomer retained a golden aura as he stepped down from the counter. He wore a white three-piece suit with a spotless tie and fedora. Polished white loafers landed inches from her nose, and she couldn't help but notice they remained spotless despite his standing in the same mess that coated her. In fact, the muck had receded from his soles. This seemed entirely unfair.

He looked down at her and shook his head as if she'd been caught out past her curfew. His ebony skin provided a hard contrast to the outfit, but the sharp angles of his face matched the creases in his jacket and suit well enough.

"What have we here?" His words clipped out as if measured by a ruler and compass.

Before Dani could summon the wits to retort, the janitor trudged back in. He stood panting, soaking wet, and with his jumpsuit charred in spots. He stared at Dani for a moment before swinging his gaze to the suit.

"Ascendant Francis. A bit late, ain'tcha?"

Francis showed a tight, perfect smile. "Hail to you, Janitor Benjamin, servant of Purity. Your message was sparse on the details."

"Oh, so I gotta schedule in advance for backup in unexpected emergencies?"

Francis cocked an eyebrow.

"Don't gimme that look." Ben spat at the other's shoes. The spittle struck an invisible barrier and ricocheted over Dani's ear. "I'm filin' for a full review. Ain't never seen anything like what happened here."

The suit remained unmoved. "Save your excuses for Destin."

"Excuses. You use that word a lot when I'm around. Ever consider exercisin' your verbosity, eh?"

Enter the Janitor

“I’m shocked you used such complicated words in proper context. Did you steal them from a crossword puzzle or is Carl tutoring you?”

“Hey, don’t be makin’ this personal. Even you could learn a few things from Carl.”

“I highly doubt that.” Francis’ flat gaze shifted to Dani. “I see we have a new recruit.”

“Just take her feet already. I’ll grab her shoulders. Then get the scrub-team in here, pronto.”

As they lifted her, she stared up at their faces and tried to comprehend what was happening. Francis’ glow expanded to surround the three of them. Through an increasing mental fog, the golden hue and unexpected warmth made her think about being carried to heaven.

“Are you angels?” she whispered.

The janitor hacked a laugh. “Far from it, princess. We’re your new employers.”

CHAPTER THREE

Ben grumbled at Francis' reflection in the glass wall of the Employee Orientation room. "Only tell me she's not what I think she is if she ain't."

Francis' brow twitched and his lips thinned. They peered through a seamless floor-to-ceiling window to the white-walled room on the other side, complete with padded cot and tiny sink. The new recruit lay on the cot, dressed in a plain cotton robe. Aside from the occasional twitch, she'd remained unconscious since they'd deposited her there twelve hours ago.

The Ascendant consulted his clipboard. "Analysis confirmed the nature of her power. She's a Catalyst. Likely an inherent gifting that remained dormant until her survival instincts and proximity to your energies woke it." He scanned the compiled data. "Danielle Hashelheim. Twenty-two years old. Biology major, junior year, with an admirable GPA. Has a marked history of mysophobia, a variant of OCD."

"Myso-whatsit now?"

"Mysophobia. Germophobic behavior."

"She don't like Germans?"

Francis sighed, and Ben hid a grin.

“Germs, Benjamin. She’s afraid of germs and contamination. Despite that, she’d make a fine apprentice, given the proper mentor.”

“Maybe.” Ben rocked on his heels. “But I sure wanna weep for whoever gets stuck with this precious little cupcake.”

Francis frowned and eyed him sidelong. Ben wondered what that look was for, and then recognized it as pity. He gawped in realization.

“You ain’t serious.”

“Effective immediately, she’s your protégée for the next year.” Francis’ stiff tone made it clear what he thought of the assignment. “Or until the Board decides she’s gained enough control over her powers to be an independent contractor.”

“You’re ribbin’ me. That just ain’t possible. What about ...” Ben found himself scratching at his right arm and forced his clenched hands to his sides. “You know my last review by the Board. Even if they did give me back training duty, I ain’t gonna take it. I refuse.”

“Normally I’d echo your sentiment,” Francis said. “Yet despite my best efforts, the Chairman convinced the Board you’re the best candidate.”

“I don’t care what he did. Ain’t no way I’m doin’ this, even if I have to mop the Sewers from one end to the other. You can shove whatever orders they gave back up your puckerhole.”

Francis shook his head as he scribbled a note. “Pucker ... hole. Why do you persist in coming up with new vulgarities? You know the Board will simply add them to the censor list.”

Ben tapped his temple. “Gotta make sure the ol’ lump still has a spark or two left. Now stop tryin’ to distract me. I ain’t budgin’ for nothin’. This girl ain’t getting anywhere near me.”

“All variables have been considered,” said a new voice. *“You were unanimously voted to be her mentor.”*

A pale face gleamed in the depths of the glass, matching neither Ben nor Francis’ reflection. Ben glared at the projection, wishing he could wipe it away like any other unwanted smudge.

“Destin.” He forced his tone to be a shade more respectful. “Chairman. It’d make my day if you told me Francis here is a few feathers short of a duster.”

“Ascendant Francis’ sensibility remains intact,” Destin said. *“You are her caretaker.”*

“You do remember what happened to my last apprentice? The one who drowned with his head stuck in a toilet? And that’s before—”

“Any danger has been deemed insignificant compared to that which she presents to herself and those around her. You were and, in my opinion, still are one of the most capable janitors we have, despite the unfortunate circumstances.”

“That’s a real squirmy way of puttin’ it.”

“Sir,” said Francis, “this girl needs careful handling. Janitor Benjamin is hardly known for his subtlety and empathy.”

Destin’s smile reminded Ben of an alligator’s—starting and stopping at the teeth. *“Francis, your last performance review included the highest praise of many attributes. Subtlety and empathy were not among them either. That’s not the point here.”*

“What is the point?” Ben asked.

“The point is I fought for you on this, Benjamin, and would not appreciate my confidence being misplaced.”

“Shoulda figured your reputation would be involved.”

“Consider this a qualified apology for the way we once treated you.”

“An apology? Somehow it ain’t feelin’ like one.”

“Despite your unorthodox views and position, I know you will provide the firm guidance that few, if any of the other Cleaners, could give Ms. Haselbeim. If you encounter any truly serious issues in the course of her training, I am making myself available, despite my busy schedule. But I know you won’t disappoint.”

Destin’s visage faded. Ben let his forehead thump against the pane where the Chairman’s face had been. “I’m too old for this.”

Francis coughed. “I once swore to never doubt the wisdom of the Chairman. In this case, however, I could make an exception. The consequences of fouling a job should never include being given more responsibility.”

Ben glowered at him. “You think this is ’cause of what happened in the library? You think I bungled that and this is some sorta punishment? Didn’t Destin review the situation?”

“I gave your report all due consideration,” Francis said, “and declined to pass it on to the Chairman.”

“Meanin’ you put it through the shredder.”

“The Chairman can’t be distracted by every fanciful account of reanimating blot-hounds.”

“Fanci—for Purity’s sake, Francis, you think I’d let any regular blot-hound get the better of me? That thing not only popped back up after havin’ its core shattered, it at least tripled in strength and blasted through my defenses like they was made of soggy newspaper.”

The Ascendant looked pointedly at Ben’s right arm. “With your current condition, I’m not surprised your measures proved inadequate.”

Ben grabbed the man’s lapel. “What’d I warn you about makin’ this personal?”

A thump made them both jump back. As they’d argued, Dani had woken and rolled off her cot. She’d run full-tilt into the glass in an attempt to flee, but rebounded and fell onto her butt, dazed. Her stunned phase passed quickly, though, and she shoved back up, fists pummel-ready.

“You mother*****!” she shouted. Her face screwed up as her voice failed to complete the curse.

Ben sighed and crossed his arms. “This oughta be fun.”

She pounded on the glass. “Let me out, you ***** lunatics! You ****faced *****!” She clapped a hand over her mouth and retreated a step.

Ben grinned. “Well, now. We might just get along after all.”

Dani tucked fists under her arms as she inspected the boundaries of the Orientation room. Glancing down, she appeared to notice her bare feet for the first time. With a yelp, she leaped back onto the cot and huddled against the wall. Her eyes clenched shut, and a tremor rippled the air.

“Hoo boy. Is she—”

Water spouted out of the sink and struck the ceiling. Within seconds, a miniature thundercloud formed, complete with tiny flashes of lightning. Sheets of rain blew about, though Dani remained untouched in the midst of it.

“She’s triggered,” Francis said, as if commenting on the price of milk. “Must be the fright of her unfamiliar environment.”

“Ain’tcha gonna neutralize her?”

“That’s your job now.” The din within the holding room grew. “I suggest you hurry.”

Growling, Ben rapped on the glass until Dani peeked with one eye. Even through the storm, her fury shot his way like a sniper

bullet. Her lips moved in silent threat, and thunder rumbled in sync.

“I know you can hear me,” Ben said, unzipping a large pouch on one pants leg. “So I’m gonna make you a deal. See this?”

He pulled a bottle of gel from the pouch. Not the same one from the library, which had melted into the blot-hound; he’d come bearing a replacement as a peace offering.

She fixed on it like a magpie spotting a piece of tinfoil. Her fingers twitched, and Ben thought she might launch herself against the glass again to try and grab it.

“Thought you might be wantin’ this. But the only way you’re gettin’ it is if I hand it over. And I ain’t comin’ in there until you settle down.” Ben pointed at the thundercloud brewing just below the ceiling. “Which mean that needs to go bye-bye.”

“Bye-bye?” Francis echoed. “Benjamin, really ...”

“Hush it. If she’s my apprentice, I can use baby language if I wanna.” He refocused on Dani. “So what’s it gonna be?”

He waved the bottle back and forth, and she followed the motion. As her focus anchored on the offered sanitizer, the indoor cloud evaporated and the waterspout trickled off. Drains sucked away whatever liquid had collected on the floor.

While leery of another outburst, Ben stuck his palm to the window. A pane of the glass slid aside and he slipped through. Edging toward her, he held the bottle at arm’s length as if offering a hunk of meat to a rabid wolf.

As soon as it came within reach, she snatched the bottle up, popped the top, and squeezed a third of it into her hand. Ben’s eyes watered as she slopped the gel onto her arms, head, and feet with gleeful abandon.

After every last visible bit of skin was coated, a great weight seemed to lift from her shoulders.

“See?” He patted her back. “All better.”

She spun and screamed. “Don’t touch me, you son of a *****!”

The smack sent his ears ringing. He grabbed her wrist to block a second shot. “Now, princess, let’s not make this personal.”

“You abducted me, you *****! That’s pretty ***** personal.”

“You burned down and flooded your library. You might wanna say thanks.”

“Thanks? Are you ***** me?”

“If we’d left you there, you’d either be locked up in jail or the loony bin.”

“What the **** are you talking about?”

Ben ran a hand over his growing bald spot. *Oh, this is gonna be jolly.*

Her nose wrinkled as she checked him over, obviously unimpressed with his janitor outfit and black rubber boots. He had about a foot on her, but her ferocity more than made up for the difference. He scratched his stubbled chin and figured he might’ve made a better impression if he shaved more than once a week. Or looked forty years younger. No doubt she’d already filed him away as having dentures and wearing diapers. Not too far from the truth.

“Where am I?” she asked at last. “What’s going on? And why can’t I ***** swear? Did you implant some sort of chip in my brain?”

“You’ve watched too much sci-fi, princess. Chips in the brain? That’s ridiculous. Naw. There’s a company-wide spell in place. Called a foul-filter. The Board figured it was ... what’s the word? Unbefitting?”

“Unbecoming,” Francis offered from outside.

Ben snapped his fingers. “That’s the one. Unbecomin’ of us Cleaners to have dirty mouths. Gotta keep the image as sparkly as possible.”

She poured another helping of gel and worked it between her fingers. “What the **** are you talking about?”

“It’s a little complicated,” Ben said. “To lay it out plain, you tapped into a latent talent during that little fracas at the library. Francis and I,” he nodded to the Ascendant, who bowed, “brought you back here to recover and to ... train.” He forced that last word out through clenched teeth.

Dani stared at some distant point. “Latent talent?” she echoed, monotone.

“Yup. Latent talent. Power. Magic. Spellwork. Energy manipulation. Supernatural manifestation of willpower. Mega-weird stuff that sends the common folk freakin’ and spawns a whole lotta tabloid headlines. Whatever you wanna call it.”

“Magic? That’s impossible. Utter bull****.”

He cupped a hand around an ear. “Wossat? Couldn’t rightly hear you. Some impossible magic must’ve got in my ear.” He sighed. “For

a student, I figured you'd get past this mental roadblock a little faster. 'Specially figurin' you was the one who just torched and flooded a library."

Her eyes narrowed. "Am I in trouble? Is that it? You guys are cops?"

"Not quite." Ben sat on the edge of the cot, and she pulled back further. "Look, Dani—can I call you Dani?"

"No."

"Thanks. So, Dani, you're what we call a Catalyst. You trigger natural disasters on a minor scale. It's one of the most dangerous and rare junctions of power around these days. Plenty of folks, 'specially Scum, are gonna want to use that. You're lucky we got to you first."

She eyed him as if he spoke in a foreign language. Then she shook her hair out and sat up straighter. "I want to call my parents."

"No, you don't."

She scowled. "Shut up. If this is some sort of prison, I deserve a phone call."

"It ain't a prison," he said. "It's your new home base. At least until you get a handle on that nasty power of yours."

"Give me my phone call!"

Ben looked to Francis, who shrugged and drew a cell phone—white of course—from a jacket pocket. He tossed it to Ben, but Dani snatched it in mid-air. She'd tucked both hands inside their sleeves so she could hold the phone without touching it. As she stabbed at the numbers, Ben walked outside to wait.

"A'ight. But I warned you."



Dani barely noticed as the janitor—or whoever he really was—left the cell and a glass panel slid into place behind him. As the line rang, she tried to force her thoughts into a logical order so she could make a coherent plea for help, but nothing made sense. Janitors? Magic? Pipe monsters terrorizing her college? Had someone drugged her coffee?

The connection clicked, and her mother's voice bubbled out of the speaker.

"Hello?"

“Mom? It’s—”

“Danielle! I just got your message. So exciting. So wonderful. Of course, I understand you’ll have to miss the family reunion, but such is the price of pursuing your dreams.”

Dani’s mental equilibrium tilted near to capsizing. “Message? Mom, what the **** are you talking about?”

“Oh, don’t tease, silly girl. Now, I’m sad too that we can’t have a going away party, but considering it’s such a rare opportunity, you don’t want them rescinding the offer.”

“Mom, please—stop—just ***** stop and listen.” As with all previous attempts, the curse formed in her head but vanished somewhere between her brainstem and tongue. “Whoever you heard from, it wasn’t me. I’ve been abducted.” She looked over to Ben, who waved and smiled. “They’re talking about magic and ... and this guy at the college library died. I mean really died and ...”

She swallowed as her mother cooed.

“It is a magical opportunity, isn’t it? I’m sure the other students would kill for the chance to study medicine overseas for a semester. Your message was a bit fuzzy, and I missed exactly where you’ll be. France? Germany?”

“Mom, are you hearing a ***** thing I’m saying?”

“What’s that, dear? I keep getting static on my end.”

Dani ground her teeth. “I’ve been kidnapped. I need help. Police. Lawyers. Something. You’ve got to get me out of here. They can’t do this to me.”

A cluck of disapproval interrupted. “Of course you’re going, young lady. Do not even consider turning this down.”

“Mom, please—”

“No, Danielle. Do not *Mom please* me. You’re a big girl and don’t need us holding your hand and braiding your pigtails anymore. We have confidence in you. Don’t forget how much we’ve sacrificed for you all these years.”

Dani pulled away from the phone and stared at it as her mother chattered on. Suspicion and horror clumped in the back of her throat, blocking further attempts to speak for a minute. At last she returned the phone to her ear.

“You have no idea what I’m saying, do you?” she asked. “They’ve done something to you. I could talk about flying to the

moon on giant grasshoppers and you'd still hear what they want you to."

"That's wonderful, Danielle. I'll let your father know when he gets back from his business trip. I'm very proud of you, and I know he will be too. Just don't forget to take pictures and write."



Ben winced as Dani flung the phone at the window, where it shattered. She returned to sulking on the cot, clutching the gel bottle like a teddy bear. At least it hadn't been his phone. It would've taken weeks to requisition a new one from Supplies.

He remembered his own employee orientation—the gradual realization that his life would no longer be the same. That his dreams no longer mattered in the larger scheme. Better to hit them with the hard truths right off. Stringing recruits along did them no favors. The capable ones adapted to their new existence, while the rest ...

He shook his head. At least she didn't seem the fainting flower type, despite the germ thing. He worked his jaw where she'd slapped him. Nope. Definitely not delicate.

He reopened the door pane and stepped back inside.

Dani turned just enough for one bright green eye to glare out at him. "What kind of sick joke is this? Are my folks in on it too?"

"Wish I could say they was," he said. "But they, plus all your classmates and any close friends, don't even think you're in the country anymore. It's kind of an insurance policy on our part."

"What?"

"Aside from bein' an insufferable *****—" He swung around at the Ascendant. "Oh, c'mon. You even reported that one?"

Francis waved in a silent *Get on with it*.

Ben glowered as he turned back to Dani. "Aside from bein' an insufferable *picklehead*, Francis," he pointed back at the man with his middle finger, "heads up our scrub-teams. If he's done his job, your old dorm room is empty, your accounts frozen, and anyone close to you has received a farewell call from someone soundin' an awful lot like you. I'm bettin' your school transcript even shows

you've been transferred to some swanky institution, though no one really knows which one." He shrugged at her increasingly disturbed look. "It's the best way. As soon as HQ identifies a new recruit, the scrubbers wipe out any connection to your previous life so we can train employees without worryin' about inconveniences like friends and family tracking you down."

She sat up, taking several deep breaths. "Employees? Recruits? What is this place? Who are you people? Some secret government agency?"

"Gettin' closer. But replace 'secret government agency' with 'supernatural sanitation department.'"

She stared back blankly. "You're, what, magical garbage men?"

Ben coughed and tried again. It had been way too long since his last apprentice. "We're inside Cleaner headquarters. It's the largest and oldest corporation to remain hidden from the rest of the world, and you are the latest employee to grace these fair halls. Though, technically you're still an intern."

"Unpaid, of course," Francis added.

Ben shot him a look. "Not. Helping."

Dani's brow scrunched up. "The Cleaners. Right. So you run a paranormal laundromat?"

"That's one division of our operations, yup."

"I was joking!"

"Actually, you was bein' serious without realizin' it. Happens a lot 'round here. The Cleaners have been the front line in a battle that's been going on ever since the Babylonians invented soap." He held a hand out as she opened her mouth. "Metaphorically speakin', a'ight? Purity and Corruption—capital P and C, mind you—are the two major players tryin' to rule this planet. We're Purity's footsoldiers. We get the dubious honor of keepin' the rest of the blissfully ignorant folks safe from Scum, in whatever form they take, such as the nasty bugger that tried to nibble our faces last night."

Dani's mouth worked, but no sound came out. She wore the slack expression of someone who'd been cold-cocked by a psychic two-by-four.

"It's a lot messier than that," he said, "but you get the idea. Anythin' you wanna ask right now?"

She nodded slowly. "Who's going to feed my lizard?"

Of all the questions he'd expected, this one made it his turn for a slow blink. "Is that one of those ... waddaya call ... euphorisms?"

She tugged at her frazzled hair. "Euphemism. And, no. I have a lizard. Tetris. He's a bearded dragon. I keep ... kept him in my dorm room. If I'm going to be locked up with you all, I need to make sure he's okay until I get back."

Ben looked to Francis, who cocked an eyebrow.

"There's nothing about a lizard in her profile. My team was very thorough." The Ascendant scanned his clipboard. "All of her possessions from the dormitory are currently stored in locker bay twenty-seven. Had a lizard been processed, I would've been notified."

"Orange and red guy," said Dani. Her focus remained distant. "Thorny all over, but loves to cuddle. He only eats grubs and crickets."

"Send someone to check on it," Ben said. He snorted at the Ascendant's glare. "The woman wants someone to feed her lizard. I think we can do that to ease her mind, eh?"

Dani massaged her forehead. "I'm expecting to wake up in a straightjacket any second now. This can't be real. What proof do I have you're not just some crazy old man?"

"I prefer crazy ol' coot. Sounds more fun." Ben hunched to meet her eyes. "Listen, I know it's tough to believe at first, but I needja to try, for your own good. But if you wanna keep playin' say-it-ain't-so, then there's somethin' you gotta see. C'mon." He moved for the exit.

"Wait." At his glance, she wiggled her toes. "I need shoes. No way am I going barefoot. Do you have any idea how many parasites and germs get stuck on your feet?"

"Princess, you're in the Cleaners' headquarters. You could lick this floor all day long and your tongue would come away cleaner for it."

She grimaced, but eased one foot over the edge of the cot, like a questing antennae. However, she pulled back at the last second.

"I ... can't. I just can't."

A pair of white slippers hit the floor beside Ben. He stared back at Francis. Where in tarnation had these come from? Was he planning on visiting the spa later? When the Ascendant offered no comment, Ben nudged the slippers Dani's way.

She poured more gel into her hands. She first wiped the shoes down, especially spots he'd touched, and then redid her feet before slipping them inside.

Ben squinted at the half-empty bottle. "Ever think you're a little overeager to slop that stuff around?"

"No. Why?"

"No particular reason."

Francis snagged his arm as he left the room.

"Where do you think you're taking her?" the Ascendant asked.


Ben eyed the man's hand until it was removed. "She wants real," he said. "I'm gonna show her real. Then she's joinin' me on my rounds. Unless Destin is givin' me paid leave for the rest of the month, I still gotta job to do. 'Sides, ain't field experience the best way to learn?"

"Don't take her training lightly. I'll be keeping a close eye on you both."

Ben looked over to where Dani stood on wobbly legs. She shuffled toward the exit as if afraid a trapdoor might open at any moment and drop her into a snake pit.

"I'll treat her like my own daughter," he said. "Now go check on that lizard."

CHAPTER FOUR

 ani hesitated as the janitor shuffled down the hall, acting as if he didn't care whether she followed or not. For the first time in her life, she felt cut adrift from anything that could help her decide what to do next. The only firm things she had were the bottle he'd given her and the robe she wore.

She checked behind her, making sure the garment didn't flap open like a hospital gown. When had they switched her into this outfit, anyway? More importantly, who'd done it? She shuddered, thinking of grubby hands pawing all over her. A bath. That would set her mind at ease—or at least keep full-blown panic at bay.

The other man, Francis, watched her from the other side of the sliding glass barrier. His unwavering gaze creeped her out more than the idea of tagging along with Grampa, so she hurried by in pursuit of the janitor.

After catching up to Ben, she went on autopilot while looking every-which-way for an exit. The bland hall continued for a stretch before widening and branching off into a maze of paths. Ben led her through several turns, a large room with shelving stacked with silver buckets, and another glass barrier which slid aside at his touch.

Foot traffic crowded the corridor beyond. Everyone wore either a janitorial jumpsuit or other dirty work getup. They all carried assorted cleaning and maintenance tools, though with eye-catching variations from the normal household implement—such as the duster with fiber optic feathers, or the ladder with runes chiseled into its stone steps.

One woman yelled at a bucket of water she carried past. “You want me to flush you? Huh? You want a one-way trip to the Sewers? Then the next time I give you an order, the only answer I expect to hear is *Yes, ma’am*. No more backtalk.”

Ben chuckled and patted the bottle hooked onto his belt. “Some people just can’t handle workin’ with partners.”

“What?” Dani asked.

“Wasn’t talkin’ to you, princess.”

“Who, then? Your spray bottle?”

“Yup.”

Dani searched his droopy face for any sign of a joke; seeing none, she shook her head. “***, you must be lonely.”

He led on without retort. Dani cringed as she followed, trying to not touch anyone. With each bump, she squirted a little gel and rubbed it on the spot and her hands.

A few folks nodded to Ben, while others wrinkled their noses as if he’d forgotten to shower. With his grungy odor, it was no wonder. A pair of white-suited women walked by, and Dani looked over her shoulder at their retreating backs. Did they glow softly?

As if in response to her inspection, the women pivoted on their heels and stared back. Dani flushed, but waved to show she’d meant no harm. They continued staring, unblinking, until she edged as close as she dared to the janitor.

“What’re they doing?” she whispered.

Ben glanced back. “The Ascendants? Oh, just readin’ your mind and diggin’ up all your dirty childhood secrets to add to your company file.”

“What?!” Dani clamped a hand over her head.

Ben sighed and continued walking. “Kiddin’. Geez. They’s just curious who the new employee is. Honest to goodness.”

They turned a corner, putting the glowing women out of sight. With Ben keeping a few feet ahead, Dani tried to organize the few

facts she possessed into a plan of action.

Should she make a run for it? If this was all a big setup, some huge practical joke, then if she ran long and hard enough, she'd burst out of whatever extravagant movie set they were on and back into the real world.

But what if it isn't a prank? The traitorous question slipped in.

Ridiculous, she shot back at herself. *No such thing as magic*. And even if there was, it wouldn't be wielded by an organization of janitors. In stories, magic belonged to wizards and mages. Powerful individuals who channeled mystical energy through staves and wands—

Like mops, plungers, and toilet brushes?

Who commanded the elements of nature—

Like the water and lightning gramps here whipped around in the library?

Who fought the forces of evil throughout the land—

Like that sink monster that made you piss yourself?

*****, she swore. *I will not lose a debate with my own brain.*

How else do you explain it, then, smart girl?

Maybe sewage had backed up gas in the bathrooms and caused her to hallucinate. Maybe she'd slipped and whacked her head, and now lingered in a hospital, hooked up to life-support and all this was some allegorical dream-journey to bring her back to the land of the living.

But what if? After all, *something* had happened in the library.

Finally, Ben turned down a side hall that dead-ended twenty feet later. There, another janitor swept what looked like ashen footprints into a dustpan. He paused and leaned on his broom—which had gold threads spiraling along the handle—and eyed the pair.

“Cleaning up or adding to the heap?” he asked.

“She’s upright, ain’t she?” asked Ben, pointing an elbow Dani’s way.

The sweeper grunted and rested the tip of his broom against the wall behind him. A yellow glow coiled up the handle and flashed into the plaster. Dani stepped back as the wall faded and revealed a gray-bricked room beyond, lined with square insets. Cold blue light lent everything a steely glint.

She followed Ben inside while the sweeper went back to work. A few steps later, she glanced back and twitched when the wall rematerialized and sealed them in.

“Adding to the heap?” She winced as her voice echoed. “What’s that mean?”

Ben scanned the insets. “Just a saying some like to toss around here. Don’t read too much into it.”

“A saying? Like a password?” Dani asked. “Do you have secret handshakes too?”

“If I said we did, would you go along with this nice and quiet-like?”

“No.”

“Then no. No secret handshakes.”

Dani tried to gauge how far the hallway went, but couldn’t see an end. “Where are we?”

“Storage.”

“For?”

His lips pressed into a wrinkled line as he went to a nearby inset and withdrew a small silver container. Dani craned her neck as he turned around to display ...

“A trashcan?”

He spun it to reveal a gold plaque on the front. Engraved words read: *Jason Scottsdale*. With a flourish, he removed the lid of the miniature garbage can and tucked it under one arm. He dipped a hand in and came up, fingers pinched around a clump of gray dust.

Dani shifted back. “What is that?”

“Ashes.” Ben lifted his hand. “Welcome to reality.”

Before she could dodge, he blew the ash into her face. His foul breath hit her along with a cloud of particles. She gasped in shock and sucked in a mouthful. Bending over, she retched, trying to expel every last grain that coated her tongue. No matter how much she spat and hacked, the stuff clung to the back of her throat. Her hands shook, bile surged up her throat, and she wondered if gulping sanitation gel might be overkill.

At last, desperate for breath, she straightened and prepared to shriek at the janitor for—

Her knees locked. Ben had vanished. A younger man stood in his place, sporting combed hair and a tie. He appeared transparent except for his facial features and faint body outline.

Grinning, he held his hand out. “Er ... hello. I’m Jason. You must be the new recruit.”

Eyes widening, Dani backed up until she bumped into the opposite wall. Cold brick pressed against her thin robe, and she shivered.

This was ... this was ... the man in the library. The one who had ...

Died.

He withdrew his hand and smiled sheepishly. "I wish I'd lived long enough to meet you properly, Miss Hashelheim."

She blinked. "Wha—you know me?"

"In a fashion. Once a Cleaner, always a Cleaner, even after we retire. We stay tapped into the company newsletters and memos."

"This," She waved at the hall, which had taken on a foggy blue texture, "is retirement?"

"Not exactly sipping beers on a tropical island, huh? But it lets us stay in the fight, if in a small way. Like helping with Employee Orientation. That's why Ben brought you here, isn't it? To give you the chance to clear up any doubts and confusion." He crossed his arms. "So go ahead. Ask me anything."

Dani chewed her lip. "Were you ... clean?"

"Clean?"

"You know. Herpes. Syphilis. That sort of thing."

"You summoned my ghost to find out if I had any STDs?"

"It's important!"

He sighed heavily, but shook his head. "I was a virgin, okay? Never had any health issues beyond a couple broken bones. Satisfied?"

A small knot of tension loosened inside her stomach, but her relief proved short-lived. "Is this supposed to guilt me into believing?"

His brow wrinkled. "Guilt?"

"Like Scrooge seeing the three ghosts. Aren't you going to blame me for your death or something?"

"Blame you? Hardly." He smiled. "Lady, you saved a lot of people from getting killed. If your talent hadn't awakened like it did, things would've been a lot messier before the end. That beast you destroyed was called a blot-hound. Ben got called in because it was infecting the water supply on campus. Unchecked, it would've caused widespread manic depression, illness, and not a small number of suicides by the end of the semester. That's partly why

we're here." His voice turned wistful. "Well, I guess, why *you're there* is more accurate. I had my time, short as it was. Now it's yours."

"Mine? I don't want this."

"You sure? Think about it, Miss Hashelheim. The Cleaners are dedicated to wiping out all forms of Scum throughout the world. All sources of filth and disease. We stand against everything that wants to drag humanity down into the muck of Corruption." He winked. "Germs, too. Doesn't that line up with how you've lived all along?"

"I ... I guess. But I'm supposed to become a doctor. I don't want to just be a janitor, even a magical one." Dani, the Magic Janitor? Sounded like a cheesy cartoon series.

"It may seem odd at first, but trust me. This is so much more than being *just* a janitor. Give it a chance. I think you'll find you have more in common with us than you think. What division are you assigned to, anyways? Janitorial? House-cleaning? Plumbing?"

"They said I'm a Catalyst."

"Oh."

"Oh? What's *oh* mean?"

He raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Er ... well, just try not to kill any coworkers, okay? Doesn't look good on annual reviews."

"Swell. Any other advice?"

"Uh ... oh! Meatloaf Tuesdays in the cafeteria. Avoid it. Good luck!"

Jason faded away, and Ben popped back into view. Before she could say anything, he held out a small cup filled with a purple liquid that smelled of bubblegum.

"Rinse."

The grainy texture in her mouth convinced her to snatch the cup and toss the contents back. She swished vigorously, gargled, and then looked around for someplace to expel the foulness.

He held out his empty hand, fingers curled as if holding an invisible cup. "Spit."

No hesitation this time. She spat into his hand—*That's for blowing ash into my face!*—but after a tiny flushing noise, he uncurled his fingers to reveal a dry palm.

She crumpled the cup and threw it at him. “Do you bring everyone here on a first date?”

He caught the cup and tucked it into a pocket. Then he licked a thumb and polished a smudge on Jason’s trashcan urn, set back into its cubby-hole.

“The dead got a lotta hindsight,” he said. “I figured you two could use a chat. Purity knows, I’ve visited here plenty of times for a bit of perspective.”

Ben made a circular motion with his hands. The overhead lights brightened and revealed rows of insets stretching down to a distant infinitesimal point. As she watched, each inset brightened from within, revealing countless trashcans with gold nameplates.

She swallowed. Hard.

This was a cemetery. One that testified to innumerable sacrifices to the cause these people upheld. If she followed along so far, this included keeping the world clean and safe. And they wanted her to join them.

That was kind of cool.

As much as her rational mind struggled, she had yet to come up with a better explanation for all she’d experienced. She could opt for the “this-is-all-a-hallucination-or-coma-dream” path, but the practical side of her voted that she start treating this situation as real until evidence proved otherwise.

Besides, the ghost had given her one anchoring truth. If these people, this company opposed filth and contamination, like she had all her life, then why didn’t she embrace them despite the ignoble workers they masqueraded as? If they fought disease on a large scale, as she’d dreamed of in pursuing her medical degree, then perhaps they could equip her to do the same.

She needed to accept her world had changed.

No. Not the world.

She had changed. Something impossible had manifested within her. She could feel it, a ball of energy thrumming deep in her chest. She wanted to chalk it up to anxiety or fear, but even the purest, strongest emotion couldn’t summon earthquakes, fire, and floods.

And if she denied all this and escaped, then what? There’d always be the knowledge that something lurked behind the curtain of normalcy. Could her sanitation routines protect her? Could she

fight pipe monsters with hand wipes and a UV wand?

Yesterday, all had been neat and orderly and clean. Now she couldn't even depend on going to the bathroom without something trying to kill her. She hugged herself and shuddered.

The floor quivered.

Ben spoke in a warning tone. "Hey, now ..."

She realized she'd shut her eyes at some point, but still saw the room clearly. The core of power had lit within her again and sent tendrils probing the elements. Metal. Glass. Earth, far below. All of them waiting to crack and rupture and crumble. The more she tried to rein in the energies, the more her fear spiked and the power swelled in response.

Ben's voice sounded far away. "C'mon, now. You can stop this. Just try."

Dani tried to say she *was* trying, but it came out as a snarl. The floor rumbled, and the power started to peak—

Cold liquid struck Dani's face and splashed over her arms and chest. She gasped and shook her head to clear the water from her eyes. Her cheeks heated as she glared at Ben. He held his spray bottle poised for another dousing, the top in his other hand.

"What was that for?"

"Sorry, but it's the best way," Ben said. "Most talents get stronger through focused willpower. Kick the focus in the nuts and you scatter the energy."

Warily, Dani quested toward the power. The energies had indeed subsided, though a knot of it slumbered in her chest like a swallowed stone.

Ben held the spray bottle her way. "Okay. C'mon back."

"Excuse me?" She jumped as the water soaking her hair and robe splashed to the floor, leaving her dry. The animated liquid formed a platter-sized bubble which rolled Ben's way and flowed back into the bottle.

Dani didn't blink until her eyes started to burn. After he scooped up the rest of the water, Ben sealed the bottle and offered it for inspection.

"Meet my partner, Carl." He swished the contents. "He's a water elemental. I did his folks a big favor a while back and he was

their thank you gift. Was gonna introduce you earlier but this all needed sortin' out first."

Dani remembered how to operate her tongue. "A water elemental."

"Yup."

"Named Carl?"

"Well, people can't rightly pronounce his real name, and he seems fine with it."

She edged over and flicked the bottle. The water swirled, forming cavities and geometric patterns too fast for her to identify.

"Was that him talking? What'd he say?"

Ben harrumphed. "Well, the whole of it means he thinks you're attractive. For a human."

A giggle escaped Dani. It rose into a few hiccups of near-hysterical laughter, and she came close to hyperventilating again before regaining control. Ben kept an eye on her, likely making sure she didn't trigger another earthquake.

"I know it's a lot to take in at once," he said, "but don'tcha worry. You've already been assigned an instructor to teach you to control your abilities."

That cut off any lingering mirth. "Who? That Francis stiff?"

Ben cleared his throat and tapped his chest.

"You're. Kidding."

"Wish I was."

"Look, it's not that I don't appreciate the whole bonding-in-a-morgue shtick, but I'm a big girl." She set her jaw and raised a fist. "I can accept all this because I don't have any other options, but I don't want to be chaperoned by someone old enough to be my grampa; especially one who looks and smells like he hasn't showered for a week."

Ben wrapped his hand over her knuckles and forced her arm down. She jerked away and applied a liberal amount of gel to where he'd touched.

"Let's not make this personal, princess. First off, I'm the furthest thing from your granddaddy. I ain't gonna dole out candies and tell the same joke six times in a row. Second, I got as much choice in this as you do. And third, I'm doin' this for your own good. I may not like being saddled with your diaper bag, and you

may not like havin' to put up with my handsome mug, but I don't think either of us wanna see the Board hunt you down and scrub you out quicker than you can spit on their shiny shoes."

"What?"

"Oh, did Jason skip that part? Lemme clue you in. If the Board thinks you might go over to the other side, to Corruption, they'd rather wipe you out before lettin' Scum get a hold of your power. Francis would be delighted to do it himself."

The blood drained from her face. "He ... they wouldn't dare. I'll ..."

"You'll what? Reality is, you're a ... what's the word? Libation?"

Her scowl returned. "I think you mean *liability*."

He snapped his fingers. "Right. I'm here to teach you how to be dangerous to Scum and whatnot, instead of coworkers and innocent bystanders. So whaddya say? Wanna learn how to put the fear of Dani into all things foul and nasty?"

She had to admit, she liked the sound of that. It'd be a nice reversal of the role she'd played most of her life. Maybe someday she wouldn't need her sanitation kit. Germs would flee at the sight of her.

"I'll go along with it. For now."

"Glad to hear. Employee orientation is now officially concluded. Welcome to the team. The sooner we start your trainin', the better. Your powers ain't gonna lie dormant for convenience's sake."

He headed for the exit. As the wall faded away again, admitting them back into the main facility, Ben urged her to catch up with a jerk of his head.

"C'mon. You've got toilet duty."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A full-time freelance writer, Josh Vogt has been published in dozens of genre markets with work ranging from flash fiction to short stories to doorstopper novels that cover fantasy, science fiction, horror, humor, pulp, and more. He also writes for a wide variety of RPG developers such as Paizo, Modiphius, and Privateer Press. His debut fantasy novel, *Forge of Ashes*, adds to the popular Pathfinder Tales line. WordFire Press has launched his urban fantasy series, The Cleaners, with *Enter the Janitor* (2015) and *The Maids of Wrath* (2016). You can find him at JRVogt.com. He's a member of SFWA as well as the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers. He is made out of meat.

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