

The Cleaners
Book 3

THE
DUSTPAN
COMETH

JOSH VOGT



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THE DUSTPAN COMETH
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BLURBS

“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

“If you’re looking for a fun, fast-paced adventure, give Enter the Janitor a read.”

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“[Enter the Janitor] was funny, exciting, and in some places, a near tear-jerker. In other words, an almost perfect start to a series.”

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“Enter the Janitor is one of those books that makes you do a double-take when you see it. A book about magical janitors fighting the evil forces of Scum? How could this not be an instant classic?”

—The Arched Doorway

“Enter the Janitor is a unique and cleverly written book ... bizarre, funny, exciting, and just a bit weird, all of which combine to make it a winner.”

—Fanboy Comics

Josh Vogt

*“I loved *The Maids of Wrath!* This is a worthy successor to *Enter the Janitor*. *The Cleaners* universe keeps expanding in all the right ways. You’ll never look at cleaning professionals the same way again.”*

—Jennifer Brozek, author of *Apocalypse Girl Dreaming*

CHAPTER ONE



Dani stared at her palm, waiting for the tornado to arrive. It all depended on this final test. Everything she'd been studying for the last month came to this point.

She hunkered down on an overturned bucket in the middle of the janitor's closet and concentrated. If she could do this, prove she had control of her power over localized natural disasters then maybe, just maybe, she could get Chapter Two in the Cleaners Employee Handbook to unlock.

The manual for her supernatural sanitation employer sat on the floor before her, a white binder big enough to clobber a raging mammoth unconscious. It lay open to the last page of Chapter One, titled: Janitor, Clean Thyself!

The text on the last page merely read: To pass this test and proceed to Chapter Two, summon a miniature tornado that does not bring harm to anyone or anything.

Dani tugged on her power, trying to stir the elements she needed. A rush of air tousled her short red curls as a black thundercloud puffed into being in front of her. Lightning lit it from within as a tiny bolt zapped her hand.

Hissing, Dani released the energies. She rubbed at the stinging spot and glowered at the manual.

"This is all your fault," she said.

The letters flowed together and then back out into a new message.

Incorrect. All is too inclusive a word. Are you giving up?

She slapped her cheeks and rolled her shoulders.

“Right. Focus. I want a tornado. Not a thunderstorm. I got this. I got this.”

She jumped up and down to warm up, paced back and forth. The janitor’s closet was no bigger than an alley kitchen—one built for a family of gnomes—but it was lined with metal shelving and stocked with bottles of cleaning chemicals, sponges, stacks of paper towels, rags, mops and brooms, garbage bags, and scrub brushes. Her cart sat in the back, laden with similar tools of her trade, both mundane and magical.

She did a few squats and jumping jacks. That warmed her up quick, what with the tan janitorial jumpsuit she wore, complete with black boots and yellow gloves.

Standing before the handbook again, she held her hand out, readying to summon. Then she paused and eyed the manual.

“Hang on. Why a tornado, anyway?”

I like them. They make me think of washing machines. Round and round.

“You’ve got to be—” Dani sealed her lips before a swear slipped out. “You’re joking.”

I am a book. I do not have a sense of humor. Another swirl of ink. This is your final chance. Fail and you are finished.

The bold text faded away, replaced by normal text.

A Cleaner must demonstrate Pure focus in any situation. They must not let their attention be sullied by any distraction. Only then can they be effective against Scum and serve Purity in all their actions.

From the table of contents, she knew Chapter Two was titled: On Matters of Bathing. Having been a lifelong devotee to the church of self-sanitation, thanks to her antagonistic relationship with germs and dirt, she craved to discover what that topic entailed. A spell for conjuring hot baths and showers whenever she wanted? She swallowed against a Pavlovian urge to drool at the thought.

For Purity’s sake, I’m letting myself get distracted.

Refocusing, she nodded to herself. “I’ve done this before. I can do it again.”

She kept her power mostly contained, activating her Pure energies just enough to draw wisps of air toward her. Directing them ... there.

A breeze swirled over her open hand. Barely breathing, Dani shut her eyes and let her elemental vision take over. She fed her senses into the environment, detecting the earth within the concrete and beneath the building's foundations, and the air wafting through the ventilation ducts. Her power wove out of her like glowing tendrils of energy, latching onto all of this and more.

As a Catalyst—one of the rarest forms of Pure-energy wielders these days—she could churn up an earthquake, crack the water pipes and flood the area, or flare a match into a firestorm.

But she only wanted one tiny tornado, small enough to fit in her pocket. She'd take it home. Call it Swirly. And it would be her Swirly and they would be the best of friends.

If she could just make it work. She needed finesse. To flick the breeze into a miniaturized vortex and stabilize it. Simple. Just break a few laws of physics.

She bit the tip of her tongue and let the barest fragment of her power brush against the still-flowing breeze. A cloudy vortex swirled into being, the tip of it settling on her palm.

Dani giggled. "Tickles."

A thin, airy voice fluttered in her ears. "*Can I help, mistress?*"

Dani growled. "As Ben likes to say: Shaddup."

A whimper, like she'd scolded a child. "*I am only trying to help, mistress.*"

"No, you're trying to get a gold star on your report card. I told you I'm not treating any of you any different than the rest. Now leave me alone until I'm actually ready to talk to you."

"*Very well, mistress,*" replied Air-Dani

"And don't call me that. Makes me sound like I should be carrying a whip instead of a mop."

"*Yes, mistress.*"

Dani clenched her other fist. The rush of frustration sent a heat wave across her skin, and her power fluctuated in response. In a blink, the tornado doubled in size. A low roar rose and the room trembled as if in the path of an oncoming train.

“Ah, \$#@*!”

The Cleaners’ foul-filter spell wiped her dirty word out of existence as quickly as she uttered it. No filthy language for paragons of Purity, no sir.

The tornado spun out of control, growing large enough to rattle the shelves. Dani stood rooted, buffeted by the very winds she’d conjured.

She thrust her hands into the swelling funnel as if she could choke it into submission.

“No! Don’t you #%\$&#@@ dare lose control.”

Except the more she focused on grappling the twister, the more her power fed into it. It had no core she could destroy. Her own destructive energies sustained the spell; if it went too far, she’d endanger the whole building and everyone inside.

So Dani whirled about, grabbed the bucket at the end of the cart, and dunked her head into the dirty bleach water. She jerked back out, spluttering and whipping her head around. She felt her energies dissipate, which meant they shouldn’t be sustaining the twister any longer.

She turned back to the tornado. It wobbled like a dreidel on overdrive. Then it shrank slightly. Dani’s gut unclenched. Breaking her focus had worked! She’d stopped it from—

The tornado exploded, gusts blasting out, with her at the epicenter. She went into a crouch, eyes shielded as everything clattered and boomed around her. At last, she dared to survey the wreck of the room. Shelves had been torn clear, spilling gear everywhere. A bag of de-icing salt had torn wide open, and unidentifiable cleaning fluids splattered the walls and floor. Her cart remained upright and clean, but otherwise the place looked like the Mr. Clean had thrown a temper tantrum.

The handbook, of course, remained pristine.

She scowled. “Showoff.”

A flash of light burst from the handbook, blinding her. Her vision cleared just as the binder slapped shut. The thunderclap this produced knocked her back until she caught herself on her janitorial cart.

“Thanks for that,” she said through gritted teeth. “Always wondered what it’d be like to get bullied by a book. I can die happy now.”

A knock sounded on the door and a young man peeked in. “Are you okay? I was walking by and heard—whoa.” His eyes widened. “What happened? Looks like a tornado hit this place.”

Dani hopped over and braced the door before he could enter. “I just tripped.”

“Tripped?” He glanced around doubtfully.

Dani leveled her best glare. “Tripped.”

He coughed. “Okay. Sure. Your mess, not mine.”

After he ducked out, she locked the door and leaned her head against it.

“My mess. Sure is.”

She turned to survey the scene. The binder caught her eye. The front title, which normally read EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK, now said:

We'll try again tomorrow.

Dani hefted the tome and held it out at arm's length as if it were a baby that had just dropped a nuclear bomb in its diaper.

“You said that was my final test.”

For the day. Perhaps tomorrow you will not be so distractible.

“Hey, it wasn't my fault that air elemental wanted to get chatty right then.” Dani frowned. “Hang on a sec. Did you somehow get it to pipe up in my ear?”

Distractions of all sorts come at inopportune times.

“You ... little ... cheat! I ought to toss you into the nearest industrial shredder.”

I am indestructible.

She narrowed her eyes. “That sounded like a dare.”

You are reading me. Not listening.

Grousing, Dani stuffed the handbook into the backpack strapped to the cart. The book's weight made the cart sink an inch and the wheels squealed in protest, but the equipment had been charmed to handle far more physical stress than normal sanitation gear.

Fists on hips, she glared at the wrecked closet and sighed. “Janitor, clean yourself up.”

Her radio beeped. *“Hey, janitor lady, there's been a spill on the second floor, near Room 210. Corpse cleanup.”*

Dani didn't answer right away. She could instinctively tell now which channel it came in on. Not a call from the Cleaners. Just mundane work. She plucked the radio from her belt and thumbed it on. "Again? Was it Martin?"

"Sorry. Don't know. Just found it. Nobody seems to be around."

Her skin prickled. Could this be Scum-work? Maybe she could save the day from some corpse-munching Corrupt beast and add another notch to her mop handle.

She grinned. "Be right down."

She tidied up just enough to clear a path to the door. Hoping nobody needed the closet anytime soon, she wheeled the cart out into the halls of the University of Denver's School of Medicine. Good thing it was a weekend if Scum were about. Otherwise more students might be around and in danger. The cart trundled down the tiled halls toward the nearest elevator, passing rooms filled with medical diagrams, dark labs with a few screens glowing within, glass-paneled display cases full of preserved organs, and lecture halls.

Nice of the Cleaners to set her up with a work-study that coincided with her pre-med studies and duties as a Cleaner.

She grimaced. *Of course, I haven't told anyone at the company that I've taken the semester off.*

Dani suspected Chairman Francis knew she'd taken a hiatus from her educational pursuits. Part of her still wanted to work in the medical research field somehow, someday—find a way to protect people from the innumerable diseases and maladies that created so much suffering around the world. Her job as a Cleaner, though, plus her studies with the Employee Handbook took up too much time and energy for her to handle homework and sit through lectures. Not to mention that continued tools training and learning to handle her powers were more immediate priorities.

Besides, I'm still doing the world some good. Maybe even more directly, destroying embodiments of Corruption itself instead of hiding away in a sterile lab.

It gave her a measure of pride, thinking of herself as a guardian of Purity, keeping innocents safe from Corruption in all its mucky machinations. She tried to rein in her anticipation as she wondered what might really be behind the spill she'd been called to handle.

Don't get your hopes up, Dani. Sometimes a puddle of frat boy vomit is just frat boy vomit.

As the elevator hummed up to the second floor, she eyed the radio on her hip. Hang on. Who had called her again? He hadn't identified himself, and his voice hadn't been familiar.

She plucked a squeegee off the cart and held it along one thigh. Best be prepared in case this turned out to be more than just a random muck monster causing trouble.

The doors dinged open and she headed off, senses ping-ponging, power fizzing as she kept it just on the edge of surging free. She turned down the hall ... and into a scene out of a B-rated horror flick.

Ten pig cadavers lay in puddles of glop as if someone had been having a water balloon fight with dissection specimens. Adult pigs, too. *She fought the urge to sneeze against the pickled reek of formaldehyde.* Normally, she enjoyed a good whiff of preservatives—they reminded her of the sanitizer gel she always kept with her—but now she fought against the urge to find something to eat just so she could lose it again.

She blinked. “The #\$\$%^?”

Exactly how could she deal with something like this? She wasn't about to haul all these pigs into a dumpster. They were school property, and she'd need a good excuse for just chucking them.

Dani checked the area for video surveillance, but didn't see any. The Cleaners had scoped out the university's security network for her. Main entrances and rooms containing valuable lab equipment were monitored, but not many of the halls themselves. Of course, whoever was behind this had chosen a section lacking cameras. That meant planning. Maybe a trap.

She tapped the squeegee against her leg. “Okay. Think. What would Ben do?”

She froze. *I did not just think that.* Because knowing Ben, he'd laugh, grab the nearest dead pig, and tell her to go long for a touch-down pass.

Would the Chairman be pissed if she called for a scrub-team in to get rid of this mess? Would that be abusing company resources?

Oh! Company protocol: quarantine any scene to avoid the spread of contamination.

She grabbed a pair of Caution: Wet Floor signs off the cart and set them on either side of the hall junction. A touch and spark of energy from her activated the wards they'd been chanted with, which would react negatively to any Scum that got too close.

Satisfied, she turned back to decide what to do with the preserved bacon. Maybe if she used her mop to shove them all into one big pile and then set them on fire? She could handle sweeping up ashes.

"Excuse me, miss?"

Dani spun, squeegee at the ready.

Three men in tuxedos stood in the hallway she'd just come from, a few steps on the other side of the Caution signs. All trim guys with slicked hair and jawbones that could double as sledgehammers. They looked like they'd come from a fashion photo shoot. Where had they been hiding? Had they ridden the elevator just after her? She hadn't heard the doors ding.

The man in the middle held an arm stiff across his chest like a fancy waiter.

"Are you Danielle Hashelheim?" he asked.

Dani slowly reached for her mop handle. "Who's asking?"

He bowed slightly. "We're the Momma's Boys Quartet, and we have a message for you."

She recounted the trio, making sure they didn't have a shorter member standing behind them. *Quartet?* "Message from who?"

"Sydney."

She aimed her mop like a spear. "If he wants to deliver a message, he can come do it himself."

The man flashed a gorgeous grin. "He thought you might react that way."

"What way?"

"Violently. That's why he sent us as messengers."

"Yeah? Three of you at once, huh? What're you going to do? Hold me down and tickle me to death?"

"No, no," he said. "Nothing like that."

He swayed in place, snapping fingers to a beat.

There, in the middle of a splash zone of pig corpses, the men began to dance and sing.

CHAPTER TWO

W'know," Ben said, "I's really thinkin' this could work, Carl." Carl bubbled and swayed in the spray bottle strapped to Ben's belt. The water elemental's burbles and splashes, combined with the occasional swirl of geometric shapes, formed a language few, other than the pair, could decipher.

Ben scanned a small book bound in fake mauve leather. He flipped through the pages, using his left thumb and—occasionally—his tongue, to turn the pages as he walked the corridors of Cleaners HQ, barely dodging other janitors, maids, plumbers, and handymen. Would've made for an easier read if he'd had both hands, but the right sleeve of his blue jumpsuit remained rolled up and pinned just below the shoulder.

"Aw, c'mon, buddy. What's the worst that could—"

Carl spouted in alarm.

Ben spluttered and choked. "Right'cha are. Never should say anythin' like that. Just askin' for troublesomeness, ain't it?" He eyed down a page and settled on an entry. "A'ight. Needin' me a test run. Who's lookin' like they need a dose of ol' Benny's sparklin' wit?"

Carl's bubbling translated roughly to: *This will all end in tears.*

"Mebbe if I drank you and got all sorts a sad and weepy. Now shut it and lemme show you what a little educatifyin' can do."

He picked a random man heading in the opposite direction. Striking a dramatic pose, Ben thrust the book out like an accusing finger.

“Would thou wert clean enough to spit upon!”

The plumber, Andy according to the name threaded on the left breast of his suit, stared at Ben as if he'd grown a second head—and a walrus head, at that. “Sorry, janitor? There something you need?”

Ben double-checked the book. “Hmm. A-ha!” He shook the book in the plumber's face. “Lumpish, toad-spotted knave!”

Andy's forehead puckered. “Have there been reports of bilge toads in the Sewers lately?”

The two men exchanged blank stares before Andy shrugged and headed off. Ben frowned down at Carl.

“I's gonna need more practice.”

Clipped footsteps made him snap the book shut and shove it into a zippered pocket.

“Janitor Benjamin. What are you doing?”

Ben grinned at the tall black man who strode up beside him. Wearing a white three-piece suit, the Chairman cut a dashing figure compared to Ben's shabby self. The Chairman's features and gaze could've only been sharper if they'd been honed by a metal grinder.

“Tryin' to sneak up on me, eh?” Ben asked.

Chairman Francis doffed his fedora and fiddled with the brim. “I've no need to sneak around the company I run. I was already making my way to you when I heard what sounded like rather archaic insults being slung about. Care to explain yourself?”

After a few seconds of a stare-me-down, Ben relented. He drew out the book and held it up so Francis could see the title.

“*Shakespearean Insults*,” the Chairman read. “*Enter the World of Slanderous Wit*.” He gave a look so flat it could've cut two dimensions in half. “Benjamin, really. You're still trying to find foul-filter loopholes?”

“Man's gotta have his hobbies.” Ben stashed the book before Francis could confiscate it.

“I'd prefer if your hobbies were more private.”

“There's a thought. Mebbe I could start collectin' the types of dirt I find under my fingernails after a job.”

He tensed as a golden glow shimmered around Francis. Imbued with the Board's authority and a hefty dose of Purity's own power,

the Chairman emanated an aura that could largely subdue the wills of corporate employees. He didn't abuse it like the former Chairman had, but he wasn't afraid to use it, friends or no.

"You ain't gonna report me to the Board for this, are you? I'm educatin' myself, see?"

"Is that how you rationalize it?"

"You betcha."

Francis heaved a sigh. "No, I'm not going to report this. I'm busy enough as it is."

Ben chuckled and barely kept himself from bouncing in place.

"Not unless it gets out of hand."

"I'll keep such a good grip on it, it'll be squealin' for mercy."

Ben made a fist. "So what'cha lookin' for lil' ol' me for? Got a new assignment for me?"

"No."

"Did'ja need me to go holler nasty names at a new recruit so you look downright cozy in comparison? Play bad Cleaner, good Chairman?"

"Not that, either."

"Then howsabout—"

"Perhaps if you stopped guessing, I could tell you." Francis replaced his fedora on his head. "Your request for rehabilitation trials came across my desk."

Ben opened his mouth. Raised a finger. Hesitated, and then cleared his throat. "Ah. I, um, put that in the Employee Recommendation box."

"Yes. You did."

Ben stared around at the white-tiled halls, feeling like he'd wound up on the decks of an alien ship. "You're meanin' that thing actually works?"

"Despite your belief that it's an incinerator in disguise? Yes, Ben. I take the time to review recommendation submissions, or at least assign an Ascendant to review them on a regular basis. I don't know what my predecessor did, but this is my effort to help the Cleaners constantly improve. Your idea was marked *of interest* and passed up to me."

Ben cringed. “You weren’t supposed to really see that. Sort of a joke in the first place. Was thinkin’—”

“I’ve approved it.”

“You what now?”

Francis’ smile chilled Ben. “Your theory sounded intriguing enough that I thought it might make for a good experiment, especially considering you volunteered as a test subject.”

“Yeah, but ...” Ben grasped for a way to slip out of this unexpected development. The one time the system actually worked, and he ended up on the pointy end. Figures. “But I can’t do it on my lonesome. Gotta have folks catchin’ me off-guard, otherwise it ain’t gonna be effective.”

“I’ve already had people sign up to do so.”

Ben blinked. “Serious?”

“Ten, so far.”

“Jeepers. Usually need both hands to count that high. Any more and I’m gonna have to take off my socks.” Ben eyed the hallway, seeing the other Cleaners in a newly nefarious light. “So ... when’s it gonna get goin’?”

“It already has.”

Ben sagged. “Aw, c’mon, Francis. Tell me you ain’t doin’ this to me.”

“Technically, you’ve done it to yourself.” He patted Ben’s shoulder. “I wish you the best success, and I look forward to your report on the results. Try to take good notes.”

As Francis headed off, Carl swished about: *Told you so. Tears. All tears.*

Ben muttered at the Chairman’s back, “Bootless, onion-eyed strumpet.”

“I heard that,” Francis called back.

“Yeah, well, ain’t no fun unless you do.” Ben scrubbed his forehead. “Dagnabbit. Now I gotta look up what strumpet means.”

He refocused on the problem at hand. The trials had already begun? Tarnation. Francis hadn’t told him who’d been authorized, either. Could be anyone. Plenty of other employees would have reason to come after Ben. Despite his being officially cleared of any wrongdoing, rumors lingered about his involvement in the death of

his wife and the potential causes of the Corrupt disease he'd contracted afterward—the one that eventually cost him both his arm and Pure powers, landing him the ignominious role as a mere “Cleaners consultant.”

He studied the nearby foot traffic, wondering if he might already be a target. How could he tell until it was too late? A pair of maids sauntered by, feather dusters strapped to their belts like pistols. A plumber shoved a whole toilet along on a handcart, the lid sealed with clamps while something inside the bowl growled and thumped around.

Ben squinted as a new figure rounded a corner: a chimney sweep striding along in a black jumpsuit, bristle brush resting over a shoulder. It'd been a long time since Ben had seen one of their kind around HQ. This guy looked a swarthy sort, with broad shoulders and dark stubble threatening to spring into a full-blown beard if he didn't savage it with a razor every five minutes.

Not anyone Ben knew, but the appearance of one of the rarer Cleaners right as Francis okay'd Ben's semi-joking suggestions set his nerves on edge. Could this guy have come to HQ simply to take advantage of the open hunting season on the janitor?

He tensed, but the chimney sweep swept past without pause. Ben let out a low breath.

H'okay. I might be a tad too paranoid for my own good. Gotta get someplace safe and shake these jitters.

He considered his hidey-hole options. His van? He could sleep there for a while, like he used to. No. Too many people knew about that. They'd find him there. His room then. Since he'd only recently begun crashing in HQ most nights, not many folks would know to look for him there.

He tapped the spray bottle. “Buddy, keep an eye on my back, yeah? Let me know if anyone starts gettin' all sneaky on me.”

Carl sloshed as Ben jogged for his room. He found the nearest glassway, a floor-to-ceiling mirror where the hall dead-ended, and pressed a palm to it. He mentally triggered the chanted access sigil tucked into his breast pocket. Lacking his old power would've normally kept him from activating the glassways or entering most of the sectors, but the Board had given him the metal sigil to let

him navigate HQ without needing a chaperone. It also let them keep an eye on his whereabouts, but he figured it was a small price to pay in order to keep working for the company that had given his life the closest thing to a purpose.

His hand slipped through the glassway's shimmering boundary. Cold rippled over his body as he stepped across and out into another, almost identical hall. He sidestepped a handyman heading the opposite direction. The woman's eyes and hands glowed with an emerald aura, and she looked determined as she vanished past him. Probably heading to heal up a Cleaner or scrub-team coming in injured from fieldwork.

He hurried on, alternating between speed walking and the occasional sprint down a section when no one else was around. No good letting coworkers think he might be panicked. That'd just encourage them.

Navigating HQ required equal parts familiarity, born from working there for years, and a mental focus on the place an employee wanted to reach. Set slightly outside of normal reality, the headquarters occasionally shifted its layout, and glassways didn't always link up to the same sections even if a person passed through the same portal within minutes. HQ's fluidic nature made mapping the corridors, storage areas, conference rooms, and main sectors less helpful in the long-term, and some Cleaners theorized the facility actually held an infinite number of rooms and halls that the Board reshaped and made available as needed to accommodate ongoing operations.

Fortunately, desperation gave Ben a pretty keen focus on his destination, and it just took a few more minutes before he reached the door to his assigned quarters.

Another touch of his hand, another tingle of the sigil in his pocket, and the door whisked open. Ben puffed a relieved sigh as he stepped inside—

And caught a bucketful of water straight in the face. Blubbing, Ben reeled, half-blind. His shoulder rammed the wall and his hip bruised against the dresser, sending him tumbling to the floor. Carl's bottle went rolling away.

Growling, he swiped his vision clear and shook his head, spraying water from his soaked hair.

A husky Hispanic woman stood over him, watching him with a bemused expression. She held a now-empty bucket tucked under one arm.

"#*%#&@#%*", Lu," he said. "Didja have to go for the face? That's the prettiest part of me."

Lucy cocked an eyebrow. "Did it work?"

Ben braced on his arm and took a mental inventory. He reached inside himself, searching for any glimmer of Pure energy the attack might've sparked, but he came up dry.

"Nope." He thumped the floor with his fist, leaving a wet print. "Durn it. Soaked to my britches and not even a dribble of power to show for it."

"Pity. Hang on. I'll be right back." Lucy went into the bathroom, and running water sounded as she refilled the bucket in the tub. She returned half a minute later, full bucket poised to sling. "Hold still."

He scrambled to his feet, still dripping. "Hang on a sec. It ain't gonna help none if I know it's comin'. That's the whole point."

She lowered the bucket. "Spoilsport."

"How'dja even get in my room, anyhoo?" He held up his hand. "Wait. Lemme guess. Francis let you in."

Her plump cheeks bunched up in a grin. "Of course. When he sent out the memo about the series of tests you suggested, I was the first the sign up. I knew you'd run for cover once he told you, so I convinced him to let me duck in here for a little ambush." Setting the bucket down, she reached up and tucked a few loose strands of dark hair back into a bun. "You really think this sort of thing could work? That it could restore your powers?"

He wagged his hand back and forth. "Sorta, kinda, mebbe? Was mostly a joke at first, but the more I got thinkin' about it, the more it made a bit of sense. We janitors got ourselves an affination—"

"Affinity."

"Right. That. An affinity for manipulin' water. Most Cleaners get their powers goin' for the first time when they're threatened by Scum or exposed to some nasty situation. So I figured mebbe if I got doused in ways that get my adrenaline goin', it'd wake things up again."

“Hydroshock therapy, hm?”

“If you wanna make it sound all fancylike, sure.”

Lucy scrunched up one side of her face in thought. “You’re assuming there’s something still in you to wake up; that Jared didn’t suck every last scrap of power out of you.”

“Sure enough.” Ben wiped droplets off his brow. “But I gotta try somethin’, otherwise I’ll go crazy sittin’ in the penalty box.”

“I’m not complaining.” She flicked the bucket, making the water quiver. “It’s kind of therapeutic for me, too.”

“Speakin’ of the kiddo, you wanna go give him a howdy with me? Been meanin’ to talk to him about what he did to me, and this might be good a time as any to sit down for a little chit-chat.”

“Uh-huh.” Lucy eyed him dubiously. “You mean since your room isn’t safe anymore, you’re going to try and camp out in his little quarantine area, where you know most other people can’t go?”

“Lu!” He laid his hand over his heart. “That’s downright hurtful, thinkin’ I’d ever use him that way. What would Dani say if she heard you talkin’ like that?”

“She’d say, ‘Ben, if you ever dare to use Jared as a shield, I will kick you between the legs so hard your balls will shake hands with your brain.’”

“Huh.” Ben scratched his chin. “Probably so. She’s gettin’ so colorful with her threats.” He glanced around the room. “Hey, buddy, where’dja go?”

Burbling led him to the bed, where he crouched and snagged Carl’s bottle out from underneath. He hooked the elemental back onto his belt and then waved Lucy to the door. “Whattaya say? Hop along with me and make sure I ain’t takin’ advantage of our very own weapon of magic destruction?”

She winced. “Only you’d call him that and not realize how scary he can really be.”

“Jared? Scary?” Ben blew a raspberry. “Kid’s like a little lamby, all sorts a friendly and peaceful.”

Lucy snorted. “The last time we visited, he almost set my hair on fire.”

He pointed at her. “Almost. But he didn’t. That’s the important part.”

“All right.” She sighed. “Let’s go see what sort of crazy he’s creating today.”

“You gotta bring the bucket?” He nodded at it. “I’m kinda expectin’ you to toss it my way now, which won’t help none.”

“I’m bringing it in case he starts burping flames again.”

Ben opened the door, motioning for Lucy to follow. “I’m tellin’ you, the kiddo’s gotten a lot better at keepin’ things under control. Soon enough, he’s gonna show the Board he don’t need no quarantine. Why, I reckon you’ll think him a little angel, all sorts a prim and proper.”

He stepped out into the hall—

And took a soap-soaked sponge to the face.

“#\$\$#%^(@&\$!”

CHAPTER THREE



Dani gawked as the performers moved in choreography, stepping carefully across the slick floor. The leader winked at her. In surprisingly honeyed tones, he launched into song while the other two hummed an *a cappella* soundtrack.

You promised me a chance to change.

I've fought hard to make you proud.

Let's unite as we arranged.

I promise to be true.

Meet me for just one evening.

I'll show my world to you.

As he crooned the last word, they bowed in unison, each with an outstretched hand.

Dani lowered her mop. Sydney had sent a singing telegram to ask her out? Well, okay. Kind of sweet of him, though with plenty of self-preservation undertones. Definitely Sydney's style. And she had promised him a date a while back, in order to secure his help in saving the life of a newborn demigod. She owed him. But she'd ignored several of his ongoing attempts to contact her, including notes left in her van and even a perfumed letter somehow delivered to her quarters in HQ. This new approach certainly caught her attention, but she remained leery of spending any time alone with the Cleaner-turned-Scum.

"That's nice," she said, "but I'm really busy these days. He'll understand. You guys will still get paid, right? I mean, it was a nice performance and—"

The lead singer struck a saucy pose and clapped once.

“All right, guys,” he said. “Same song, second verse. A little bit hotter, a little more perverse.”

In a swift motion, he tore his shirt off, revealing a sculpted, tanned torso. The other men started bumping and grinding the air, making their hips and shoulders move in impossibly fluid ways. Their self-generated music took on a thumping tempo, making Dani think of techno music.

She backed up as they advanced. “What ... what’re you ...”

The leader started singing again, but in a huskier voice. He threw in heated glances along with his swiveling hips.

*I knew you'd say no. I knew you'd resist.
I wanted to be honorable. I truly tried my best.
But I realized there's only one way to succeed.
Dani, will you go out with me? They won't stop until
you accede.*

The men danced toward her, a more horrifying sight than the dead pigs littering the floor around them. They spread out, still gyrating in disturbing ways as they moved in.

Dani opened her mouth, but only a squeak of dismay escaped.

Not a singing telegram.

Sydney had sent a strip-o-gram.

As they neared, Dani retreated, gorge rising at the thought of them actually rubbing up against her. She choked down a swell of nausea, trying to think up a way to keep the strippers back without hurting them. No good triggering an earthquake or windstorm, or conjuring lightning from the nearby electrical sockets.

She had a brief thought of squirting sani-gel all over them to ward them off. *Oh \$&^%, no! That'd just make things worse.*

She settled for thrusting the mop out again, making the nearest stripper jump back to avoid being hit in his chiseled chest.

“Stay back.”

Their leader tried to shuffle closer, but she jabbed the mop at him, flicking water at his face. “Please, lady. We have to do this.”

“Or what?” she asked.

“Or we get punished.” His lusty façade cracked, exposing hints of panic. “Please. Just accept the invitation and we’ll leave you alone.”

“Punished?” She lowered the mop slightly. “Sydney threatened you? With what?” When the men hesitated, she planted the mop by her side. “Look, I know what he can do, but it’s okay. I’ll protect you. You don’t need to do this.”

“You ...” The singer hung his head. “You don’t know what that monster is capable of. What he’ll do if we don’t follow his orders.”

She squeezed the mop handle, imagining her fingers around Sydney’s neck. “Let me guess. He turned things to dust and said he’d do the same to you if you didn’t come here and try to grind all up on me.”

“Not all of us,” he said. “Just certain parts of us.”

“Parts?” she echoed.

He grinned sheepishly and did a little bump-and-thrust with his hips. “Ones that’d make it difficult to keep doing this sort of work.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh. Oh!” She shuddered, but gathered her composure a moment later. “Listen, I can handle Sydney just fine. You don’t have to be afraid of him anymore. All your ... parts ... will stay put, I promise.”

The singer’s voice wavered. “Oh, thank god.” Looking ready to cry, he rushed her, arms raised for a hug.

She snapped the mop out, handle in both hands to push him back just in time. “Whoa! Back off, Perky!”

He blinked, tears welling in his eyes. “But you said ...”

“Oh, &\$%, you’re not actually going to cry, are you?” Dani contained another shudder, thankful she’d invested in the extra-thick cleaning gloves. “What kind of protection means you’ve got to rub your epidermis all over mine? Don’t you know how many diseases are exchanged by physical contact?”

“Um ...”

Dani sighed. “Sydney and I have an ... an arrangement. As of now, you all are officially under my protection, so if he tries to anything, he’s going to have to deal with me first.”

A low chuckle caught her ear.

“My, my, Dani. Don’t tell me you’re still in the habit of adopting any strays you come across.”

She turned to see Sydney watching from down a side hall. He leaned against a wall, smirking, arms crossed. He looked both thinner and paler than usual, with his light blond hair now streaked with platinum. His shabby T-shirt read: *If You Can Read This, Your Life is Still Meaningless.*

He straightened and clapped black-gloved hands. “Oh, do give them a round of applause, m’dear. I think they performed rather admirably, don’t you?”

She glowered at the ex-handyman. “How long have you been there?”

He walked toward her and stopped just on the other side of the chanted cleaning signs she’d set up. “Long enough to enjoy the spectacle. I wondered how you might react to their little routine.”

Dani snarled softly. “How did you think I’d react? Take them all on in a hallway orgy?”

The strippers stepped back as one, looking more afraid of this suggestion than they had of her threatening to impale them with her mop.

Sydney shrugged. “Who knows what dark desires lurk in the hearts of others? Could be that you would’ve found the combination of formaldehyde and male musk to be quite the aphrodisiac. But it’s lovely to see you’re saving yourself for me.” As she tried to splutter an outraged response, he waved at the men. “Gentlemen, if you could give the lady and me a bit of privacy, I will consider our bargain concluded. Your companion is waiting for you.”

After the strippers raced each other out the nearest doors, Dani shot Sydney a look. “Companion?” she asked.

He nodded. “You did notice they numbered three, yet called themselves a quartet?”

“I wondered.”

“Well, some people need persuading to do a job well. I simply kept one of them indisposed so the others would be motivated to do their best to woo you my way.”

“Woo me? Yeah, I’m feeling totally wooed. It’s every woman’s dream to be asked out with the help of hostages, dead pigs, and strippers.” She glared. “What did you do to their fourth member? You better not have aged him or anything.”

He fluttered his hands. “Nonsense. After they retrieved the porcine specimens, I simply left one of them in the laboratory freezers and dissolved the lock. It’ll take them a bit of time to reopen the door, but he should be perfectly fine, if a little frosty.”

She pressed fingertips to the bridge of her nose. “Sydney, this is all a bit vile, even for you. How could you scare those poor men like that?”

“Quite easily,” he said. “You simply have to know what a person values most and threaten to take it away.” He nodded at the warded signs she’d set up in the hall. “Would you mind removing those?”

“I would, actually.” She went to stand just across from him. “Why? They make you uncomfortable?”

“I’ll admit they do raise my hackles a bit.”

“You have hackles now?”

“Droll as ever. But I’d rather not forcibly remove them. The clash of energies might gain us unwanted attention, and I’m not in the mood to flex my metaphorical muscles at the moment when I could, instead, be spending time with a gorgeous and scintillating specimen of the female sex.”

“She sounds like such a lucky lady.”

“The rarest of sorts.” He flourished theatrically. “One worthy of my time and attention.”

Dani snorted. “Golly, gee. Now you’ve got me all a-flutter. How can I refuse?”

“I’d rather you not do anything of the sort.” He inched closer to the warded boundary. The air crackled, and Dani’s ears popped. “Truly, Dani, I am here simply in the hopes that you’ll honor our agreement. A single date. A chance to get to know each other better. Presenting myself like this, putting myself at risk to appear here is ... well ...” He looked aside. “A bit grating on the ego, I must admit. I’ll not grovel, but merely appeal to your sense of decency, courtesy, and unspoken desire for myself.”

Dani studied him for a minute, filtering through his little speech. Shifting aside his penchant for the dramatic and the overestimation of just how much she wanted to bake him pies and have his babies, she sensed a subtext to his act. He’d stopped just

shy of admitting being nervous; that he, in fact, feared being rejected by her. More, he was also worried that poking his head out of whatever hole he'd crawled into put him in danger of being targeted by the Cleaners once more.

Sydney admitting to being antsy? The only other time he'd done so was when they'd taken an emergency shortcut into a realm known as the Gutters to avoid being mashed into a homogenous paste. With the Gutters existing outside of normal reality, certain laws of physics—like the second law of thermodynamics—didn't apply, robbing him of his entropic powers and leaving him practically helpless.

The last time she'd seen him, he'd been duking it out with his older brother, Destin, the former Chairman of the Cleaners—before the revelation of Destin's nasty affair with a member of the Corrupt Pantheon, resulting in the birth of a godling with both Pure and Corrupt powers. Once the Cleaners had trapped the kid, Sydney had wanted to put him down like a rabid dog, citing the boy's unnatural manifestation and the likelihood of him putting the whole world at risk.

Only Dani's offer of a date had convinced him to spare the boy. Sydney had then fled in the ensuing chaos when Destin tried to slaughter his own offspring. She'd made a devilish deal and always knew she'd have to see it through sooner or later. But she'd always hoped it'd end up being much, much later. Sometime around the heat death of the universe, preferably.

“Why now?” she asked.

His smile returned, a shade relieved, perhaps, that she hadn't given an outright *no*. “Why not? You've been unresponsive to all my other overtures and it's been too long since we've enjoyed each other's sparkling company. I thought it'd be lovely for the both of us to enjoy a bit of downtime.”

Dani glanced over to her cart and the backpack hanging heavily off the side. An evening out would mean time lost that she could spend getting through the next Employee Handbook test. She'd also have to explain to her coworkers what she was up to. Francis and Ben knew of the arrangement, and the Chairman would have to approve her taking the evening shift off.

"I've been busy," she said. "The job takes up a lot of my time."

His expression clouded over. "You remember I warned you of that, yes? The Cleaners will take advantage of your every spare moment, every last ounce of energy until you are drained and left as ashes to be swept under the rug. What's the worth of work if you don't take the chance to enjoy life outside the corporate environs from time to time? All work and no play would make Dani very dull indeed."

"Since when do you enjoy life?" she asked. "What happened to the Sydney who lectured me about how pointless everything is?"

"Perhaps his perspective has shifted." He held a palm up. "Perhaps he's still capable of learning and caring for certain aspects of life more than you might have expected of him."

Or perhaps he's being a shy little shyster like before. Once an evil mucker, always an evil mucker? Or can murderous Scum really have a change of heart?

Dani wondered at this. While she'd heard plenty of stories about Cleaners falling to Corruption and going Scum-wise, she realized she'd never asked if the reverse ever occurred. Could a servant of decay and destruction turn Pure? Could a handyman-turned-entropy mage regain his healing and constructive talents? If so, would her denying Sydney send him spiraling down even deeper into the murk his mind and soul wallowed in? If she did give him the pleasure of her company and they had a decent evening, could it convince him to come back to the side of the ... well ... not angels, but the clean and shiny?

"Rules," she said.

His eyebrows rose. "Rules?"

"Rules. We need some."

"Ah. Such as leaving room for Jesus between us at all times?"

"Sure, if he wants to chaperone."

"I suppose boundaries would be wise," he said. "Wouldn't do to spoil every surprise on our very first date."

Nice try implying there'll be more than one. Dani raised a finger. "Rule number one: No trying to convert me. If I get even a hint of you trying to get me to switch teams, we're done, then and there."

He nodded. "Understood, and I'll submit a rule of my own: Neither of us will wield any of our powers. We'll remain entirely

mundane and simply enjoy a night without supernatural interference.”

“I can live with that. You also don’t get to bring any Scum friends along.”

“Nor do any of your coworkers get to turn this party into a crowd.”

“Fine. Wouldn’t want any of them to see me with you anyway.”

He flashed a grin. “Excellent. Privacy with the lovely lady, at last.”

“And there’s a time limit.”

“Such as Cinderella dashing off before midnight lest she reveal her origins as a bumpkin?” He tapped his nose in thought. “Actually, that’s not the most horrendous idea. What if we set a definitive end at, say, breakfast?”

She glared. “You get three hours of my time. After that, you don’t stop me from leaving.”

He glanced up, thinking. “Very well. I’d hate for you to get bored. Tomorrow night then. Eight o’clock. We’ll meet downtown by the clock tower.”

Dani’s stomach tightened, as did her grip on the mop. She shifted her boots, planting them more firmly to keep from dashing off as the first nervous quivers waved hello. Was she really going through with this? It’d been years since her last real date. Not that she viewed his advances as anything nearing real romance, but the last time she got involved with a guy, it ended in so many showers she’d nearly drowned. Admittedly, this all occurred before she’d discovered her ability to wreck everything around her—but Sydney’s own abilities kind of canceled that out.

“One last condition,” she said.

“Yes?”

She gestured with her mop. “Get rid of the pigs.”

Sydney grimaced. “Surely you jest.”

“Surely I am not getting paid enough to deal with your &%^\$. And do you want me wasting hours cleaning this up or do you want me getting ready for our date?” She leaned her mop against the cart and picked up the cleaning signs, dispelling the ward energies she’d invested in them. Stepping aside, she nodded at the pigs. “Well? Are you going to put on your big boy panties or what?”

Sighing, Sydney tugged his gloves off and walked around to each of the carcasses. When he bent over to touch one, a purple aura flared around his hands. Yet when he touched the pig, it merely rippled and sagged like a deflated football. Sydney frowned and his face creased in concentration. The auras darkened and, at last, the pig popped like a fleshy bubble, reduced to dust in moments. He repeated this with all the others until the hall stood empty but for the two of them and several smelly puddles.

“Much better,” Dani said.

Sydney wiped his hands on his jeans, even though his powers could leave his skin entirely sterile, should he wish it. “So glad you approve. I shall now take my leave in anticipation of a heavenly evening, devoid of distractions other than our own simmering desire.” He headed down the hall he’d appeared from, but paused after a few steps to look back. “Oh. I’d remind you that you did promise to wear a dress. I’d prefer a gown rather than, say, a frilly French maid skirt, but I’ll leave that up to you.”

He blew her a kiss and strode off.

Once he’d gone around a corner, Dani clutched the front of her jumpsuit in horrified realization.

Oh, €\$#@. That means I have to take off my uniform ...

CHAPTER FOUR



Dani careened through HQ, boots thumping, backpack whacking her spine with every step. Apologies streamed from her lips as she dodged coworkers in her haste.

“Sorry, sorry, whoops, sorry, oh %*\$@, that’ll bruise, you should get to Maintenance, excuse me, pardon me, sorry, sorry ...”

She whipped past an Ascendant, whose golden aura flared in surprise. Dani spun and jogged backward for a second, waving at the woman who glared out from under her white fedora.

“Nothing wrong! Honest. Everything’s totally fine. Keep on being awesome.” She turned forward again and sidestepped just in time to avoid colliding with a maid, who held up a toilet scrubber like a shield. Regaining her momentum, Dani raced for the nearest glassway.

She tugged her radio off her belt and clicked it onto a private channel. “Chairman ... Francis ... any chance ... you know where Ben is?”

The speaker crackled. *“Janitor Dani? Is something wrong? You sound distressed, and I believe your shift was supposed to continue for another hour.”*

“Had a little ... run-in. Had to clock out ... early.”

“May I inquire as to the problem?”

“It’s ... it’s Sydney. He’s back. I’ve got to ... got to let Ben know what’s up.”

Static burst so loud from the other end, she stumbled and stared at the radio, worried it might be acting up. “Chairman?”

“*All’s well,*” he said. “*Simply alarmed at the news. Do you need me to accompany you?*”

“No, it’s okay. I got this. Just need a little pep talk.”

“*Very well. I believe he and Janitor Lucy were visiting Jared to check up on the boy. But I should warn you—*”

“Thanks a heap.”

She rushed ahead, weaving through a crowd of Cleaners who were plodding along, ragged tears and dark stains marring their jumpsuits. Even as she hurried by, though, their uniforms sealed up and the blotches started to fade.

After a jump through a glassway, she reached the foyer where a pair of Ascendants guarded a set of plain double-doors. The doors stood open, and the Ascendants stood off to the side, chatting with each other, suggesting Ben and Lucy remained inside the quarantine area. Ignoring the Ascendants’ startled looks, she shot past them and down the hall beyond.

When she reached Jared’s quarters, she staggered to a halt and swung the backpack off and to the floor. Unburdened, she planted hands on knees and wheezed.

“Ben! I said yes! Oh, ##%, I said yes. What ... what am I supposed to do?”

She sucked deep breaths until a gurgle made her lift her head. A huge orb of water filled the middle of the room. Ben floated within it, thrashing as air bubbles streamed from his mouth.

Lucy stood off to the side, arms crossed, scowling. “For the last time, let him go, kid, or I will spank you so hard, you’ll be a wave pool for life.”

“Ben!” Dani ran to the edge of the water and tried to grab the janitor. Her hands bounced off a rubbery surface.

Ben swiveled within the water to face her, cheeks bulging as he tried to hold his breath.

A voice interjected with Dani’s thoughts.

“*Hello, Dani. We are playing a game. Want to join us?*”

Dani projected a mental reply. “*Jared, did you ask permission to play with Ben first?*”

“No. He asked for surprises. I gave him one. Isn’t it fun?”

“You’re drowning him, Jared. That’s not good for his health. Let him go, please.”

“Ob.” A sensation of guilt formed like a knot of lead in Dani’s chest, and then vanished. “Okay. Sorry.”

The orb collapsed, letting Ben *splat* on the floor. Lucy rushed to him as the liquid drained into a self-contained river that wove off to a corner of the room. Dani helped Lucy get Ben upright as he gagged and coughed. She pulled back and shielded her face as he shook himself like a wet dog, spraying them.

“You okay?” Dani asked.

“Sure, just ...” He hacked and spat. “Just gimme a sec.”

In the corner, the water congealed into a humanoid form; the image of a teenage boy, bare-chested, wearing jeans and sneakers—but made entirely of clear water. Jared ducked his head sheepishly as Dani studied him. His liquid body reminded Dani of the time when Ben’s partner, Carl, had communicated with her through her elemental tethers.

As Lucy tended to Ben, Dani went over and checked over the boy.

“Jared? Why are you made of water?”

“Don’t know,” the hybrid said. *“Woke up this way.”*

Dani frowned. Ever since they’d brought him to HQ, the kid had manifested an ever-evolving and seemingly random slate of powers. Would these chaotic displays ever end? At least his speech had gotten better. Instead of piecing together phonetic jumbles, he could manage clear phrasings, though he still refused to speak out loud for some reason.

She put a hand on his shoulder. Water slicked her palm and miniature currents swirled under her touch. “Hang here for a minute, all right?”

“All right. I’ll be good.”

When she withdrew her hand, her skin dried immediately. She returned to Ben’s side as he stood, looking less like what the cat dragged in and more like what the cat ate and then hacked back up. He coughed again and swiped his long hair out of his eyes.

“Heya, princess. Thanks for talkin’ a bit of sense into the kiddo. Got a little carried away there, mebbe.”

She squinted at him. “Ben, what’s going on? Why did Jared just try to drown you?”

“Er ...” Ben gathered his hair into a ponytail and squeezed, dribbling water down his back. “That mebbe coulda been my fault. Weren’t thinkin’ too well when I told him about what we was up to.”

Dani looked between Ben and Lucy. “And what exactly is that?”

“Tryin’ to get my powers gunnin’ again.”

She shot Lucy a look. “Is he ...?”

“He’s being serious,” Lucy said. “Ben thought a little water shock therapy might somehow jolt his Pure energies back into action. So he suggested a series of tests where he’d get hit with unexpected watery attacks, thinking the adrenaline rush and survival instincts might help him tap into the elements. He mostly meant it as a joke, but the Chairman approved it.”

Dani sighed. “Seriously? But why’d Jared get in on it? And why’s he made of water?”

“Found him that way when we dropped in,” Ben said. “Guessin’ it’s his new way of showin’ off his powers, though I ain’t sure he’s meanin’ to.”

“Great,” Dani said, glancing at the boy. “Well, at least he looks normal, otherwise. So long as he’s stable like this, maybe we can get a better idea of what’s going on with him.”

With a whoosh, Jared burst into flames.

The three of them stared as his previously watery body transformed into a column of writhing fire. The room’s temperature rose a few degrees, and waves of heat slapped Dani’s face. He blinked back at them with eyes made of blue flames.

Dani winced against the glare. “Uh ... Jared? Does that hurt?”

The teen studied his flaming hands. “*No. Kind of cozy, actually.*” He grinned, teeth backlit by an orange glow. “*Why didn’t anyone tell me being fire could be so much fun?*”

This version of him made Dani think of her fiery doppelganger—a particularly rude and crude elemental summoned during a cultish ceremony intended to turn Dani into a goddess of apocalyptic proportions.

As if my powers aren’t hard enough to deal with, as they are. One day, it’s as easy as breathing. The next, I might as well be trying to suck wind through

cement blocks while running a marathon.

She briefly shut her eyes and snaked out tendrils of power, looking like glowing lines to her inner vision. When they brushed against Jared's fiery self, she sensed nothing but flames, a super-condensed reservoir of elemental potential. She opened her eyes to see Jared watching her in return, an odd expression on his face—or perhaps that just came from the heat waves rippling out from it.

“Should we put him out or somethin’?” Ben unhooked Carl's spray bottle from his belt.

“Don't bother,” Dani said. “He seems fine except for, you know, being fire. And with how hot he's blazing, Carl would evaporate before he even touched him.”

The water elemental spouted in alarm. Ben flicked the bottle. “No worries, buddy. I ain't gonna make you sizzle for nothin'.”

“*Should I play a game with Ben again?*” Jared stepped closer, his body brightening to hot white. “*Maybe this time—*”

“No!” Dani and Ben shouted in unison.

The teen hopped back against the wall, hunched. His voice ricocheted through her mind. “*Sorry sorrysorrysorry ...*”

Dani came as close as she dared, hands raised. She wanted to give the kid a hug, but his touch left char marks across the wall and floor. “You didn't do anything wrong, Jared. It's just, the way you are right now, it could hurt us if you got too close. I'm sure it'll change soon.”

“*I don't want to hurt anyone.*”

“That's good! That's exactly the right thing to not want. Remember our lessons? Hurting people is bad. Helping people is good.”

“*But I wanted to help Ben before and almost hurt him, didn't I? Doesn't that make me dangerous?*”

Dani met Ben's eyes. “Can you put a little positive spin on this, please?”

“Sure 'nuff.” He leaned in to Jared, close enough for steam to start rising from his damp suit. “Lookee here, kiddo. Are you dangerous? You betcha.”

“Ben!” Dani cried.

He held his hand up to her. “But so's each of us here.”

Jared tilted his head quizzically. *“You are?”*

“As dangerous as rabid rhinos in a fluffy bunny shop. I mean, look at Dani. She’s a Catalyst. She can toss all sorts a natural disasters right in your face, from earthquakes to blizzards to locust plagues.”

“I can’t do locusts,” Dani said. “Or rivers of blood, or frog rains, or the whole killing-firstborn-children thing.”

He shrugged. “Eh. Probly better that way. Anyhoo, all she’s gotta do is get nice and riled, and soon she’s whippin’ up a nasty mess that takes us forever to fix.”

“Gee, thanks,” Dani muttered.

Ben winked at her. “And then there’s Lu, who—”

Lucy cleared her throat. He hesitated.

“Well, Lu, she’s the only one I’ve ever seen send a pack of blot-hounds scamperin’ for their nest just ’cause she didn’t get her mornin’ coffee. All she had to do was give ’em one good glare, and they practically piddled themselves scramblin’ for cover.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said.

Jared’s forehead wrinkled in thought. *“But why are you dangerous, Ben? You don’t have powers anymore.”*

Ben grinned and tapped his head. “Too smart for my own good, don’tcha know?” At Lucy and Dani’s low groans, he puffed his chest up. “It ain’t all about how big a stick you got to swing around. It’s havin’ the experience to know when to swing, how hard, and what soft spots you gotta hit to make ’em puke blood. And that’s where I got all of y’all beat. I got enough field work and Scum-savvy, I could be usin’ one of them silly swirly straws and still poke out someone’s eye if I aim right.”

“What’s a silly straw?” Jared asked.

“Bendy, twisty little plastic tube you use to drink things.” Ben wove a forefinger in the air, tracing loops and swirls.

“Those sound fun. Can I have one?”

“Mebbe once you aren’t fire, otherwise you’d melt it before you even got a sip in.”

“Oh.”

Dani stepped in. “I need to talk to Ben and Lucy for a couple minutes.”

“Can I read a book while you do?”

She noted the stack of books by Jared's bed. She and Ben had brought the kid a wide range of titles to keep him entertained, from comics to sci-fi paperbacks to Aesop's Fables and plenty more. But she figured it wouldn't do his mood any good if he accidentally reduced his reading pile to ashes.

"Probably best if you don't," she said. "Just hang out there for a little. See if you can figure out a way to stop being fire."

"*I'll try.*" Jared shut his eyes, face tightening in intense concentration.

Dani turned to the others. "Back to your self-imposed waterboarding. What possessed you to even think of this? It sounds a little crazy, and this is coming from someone who knows crazy."

Ben waggled his eyebrows. "Sometimes the best ideas are the craziest, princess."

"Ben, your powers are gone." She nodded at his missing arm. "You told me yourself, and everything since then's confirmed it. Jared took all you had."

A thought floated over from Jared. "*Didn't mean to.*"

"S'okay, kiddo," Ben said. "No one's blamin' you."

Just what we need, Dani thought to herself. *A godling with a guilt complex.*

Ben reached over with his other arm and touched the nub wrapped in the rolled sleeve. "He drained me, sure-for-shootin'. But just 'cause the gas tank's dry don't mean it ain't gonna get refilled sooner or later. Gotta have some hope, princess."

"Fine," Dani said. "You have hope while I have a nervous breakdown."

"Eh?"

"Something wrong?" Lucy asked.

Dani pointed back to the room's entrance. "Didn't you notice how frantic I was when I rushed in here?"

They exchanged looks, and Ben shrugged.

"Sorry. Was a might bit busy gettin' drowndified."

She rubbed her head. "I said yes."

"Yes to what, princess?"

Dani steeled herself before blurting it all out. "Sydney. He's back. And he's taking me on a date. The one I promised him. And

I don't know if I can go through with this. But I have to. I mean, I promised. He was going to hurt Jared if I didn't, and I don't know what to do, and it's all just a little too much right now."

"Oh." Ben puckered his lips. "Jeepers."

Lucy frowned at him. "You want to explain what she means by all that?"

A thud made them look to Jared ... who now stood in earthen form, his body a stony composite covered in lichen and crumbling dirt. The floor had cracked underneath his sudden weight. He patted himself down, hands clacking across his rocky texture.

"Not fire anymore!"

Dani ran over and gave the kid a quick hug. "Good job. I knew you could do it."

He hugged her back, and she grunted against the bruising force of his literally rock-hard arms as they wrapped around her. She disengaged and patted his shoulder, making pebbles drop away. "Go ahead and read for a bit. Just try not to tear the pages."

"Okay." He pounded over to the bed, crunching floor tiles with each step. Like the rest of HQ, the structure would heal itself over time, but Dani cringed when he sat on the edge of the bed and cracked the frame in half. Jared thumped to the floor. He stared down at the ruined bed.

"Oops."

"Don't worry about it," Dani said. "We'll get it fixed. Just ... don't move much right now."

He picked up a book with thick fingers, fumbling to open it. Once he became engrossed in the latest sword-waving, laser-flashing adventure, Dani returned to Ben and Lucy.

Lucy glowered at her. "So, you've got a date. With a Scum murderer."

Dani winced.

"Ain't as bad as it sounds, Lu." Ben held his hand up. "Is Sydney nasty news? You betcha. But he also helped keep our skins intact and got Destin chucked outta the Chairman's seat."

Lucy turned her glare his way. "I read the reports, Ben. He's responsible for dozens of Cleaners disappearing for good, and has sabotaged more operations than the Board is willing to admit. Most

of his file is locked up tight, so who knows what terrible things he's done that we don't even know about?"

"A'ight. Mebbe it is as bad as it sounds."

"Hang on," Dani said. "You don't know the whole story."

She started with her and Ben's initial run-in with the entropy mage, his fixation with turning her Scum-side, and how he'd tricked her into meeting with an extremist group known as the Cleansers, who wanted to end all life in a fiery apocalypse. Then she explained how she'd bargained with Sydney for Jared's life when the boy had been rendered temporarily helpless.

Lucy crossed her arms, face even stonier than Jared's earthen features.

"He's Scum," she said. "You never have to keep a promise with Scum. You should never, ever make deals with them, because they'll always find a way to twist the terms in their favor. They do work for Corruption, remember?"

"We set up rules," Dani said.

Lucy flung an arm out. "Oh, well, rules. Girlie's got rules. That just makes everything right with the world, doesn't it? Sounds like you two are going full on with the whole Romeo and Juliet shtick. Need me to point you toward the nearest priest with some poison?"

Dani scowled. "Hey, I'm not looking for a soul mate with this date. I'm just looking to survive following through on my promise."

"Survive?" Ben asked. "Y'think he's up to something nefertirious?" He frowned at their looks. "What'd I say wrong this time?"

"Nefertiti's an ancient Egyptian queen," Dani said. "I think you meant nefarious."

"Mebbe I did, mebbe I didn't."

"And no, I don't think he's out to hurt me. Not directly. But something still feels off." Dani splayed her hands. "Look, this is Sydney we're talking about, right?"

"Unless someone went and changed the topic when I weren't lookin'," Ben said.

"Well, if I didn't know any better, I'd say he's gotten desperate."

"Desperate?" Lucy asked.

"Yeah." Dani sighed. "He's been escalating his attempts to get my attention. Little notes. Then flowers. Then cards. Then long

letters. Then perfumed letters with flowers and chocolate. Even all-expense-paid salon trips. Now this whole setup with the strippers.” Her face blazed as the two janitors stared at her. “Aw, & \$ % #. I didn’t mention the strippers, did I?”

“Why not start at the beginnin’,” Ben said, “and go over that part in lotsa juicy detail.”

She sighed. “Male strippers, Ben.”

He grimaced. “What’s the fun in that?”

Lucy punched his arm hard enough. “Don’t be a Neanderthal.”

“Why not?” Ben rubbed where she hit. “Those were simpler times. Plenty of meat. Cozy caves. A guy could spit and grunt and scratch himself without gettin’ a lecture on not scarin’ any nearby kiddos, and women was waitin’ to cook up whatever dinosaur you brought back from huntin’.” This time, Dani knuckle-shot him in the same spot. He groaned and shifted to shield himself from further abuse. “Gangin’ up on me’s just provin’ my point.”

“If we could get back to me having a date with a potential psychopath who has the hots for me?” Dani asked, voice rising an octave. “Sydney would never admit it, but behind all his theatrics and bluster, I got the sense he’s ... well, almost like he’s running out of time, somehow. That he wants to have this date with me before something bad happens.”

The other woman narrowed her eyes. “Something bad happens to you or him?”

“No clue,” Dani said, “but either way, I just don’t have a good feeling about any of it.”

“Nobody here would cry if he bit the dust,” Lucy said. “In fact, we’d probably throw a party knowing one less entropy mage was around.”

“I get it. Everyone here hates him. He’s a dangerous traitor. But he does have a twisted sense of honor.”

“Emphasis on *twisted*,” Lucy said.

Dani sighed. “I trust him enough to keep to his word when he states it as straightforward as he did. We agreed on certain limits. No powers. Just a few hours, and we’re done. He won’t bring any Scum. I won’t bring any Cleaners. Just the two of us.”

“And Dani was never seen from again,” Lucy mumbled. “Cause of death? Being groped by an entropy mage.”

Dani glared. “Not. Helping.”

Lucy grinned lopsidedly. “But I am. Listen to reason, girlie. You let him get his hooks in you like this, and there may be no coming back. At best, people around here are going to wonder if you can be trusted after getting chummy with Scum like him.”

“I’m not stupid,” Dani said. “I’m not putting this up on the bulletin board or anything, and I trust you guys to keep this quiet. That’s why I came here.” She nodded to Ben. “I need a chaperone.”

He made a face. “Me? But you just said no third wheels allowed.”

“I don’t want you breathing over my shoulder or butting in for a dance. Just stay at a distance, keep an eye on things.”

“Why me? Why not Lucy or someone who could actually do something in case things go topsy-turvy?”

She gripped his arm. “Your powers.”

He eyed her askance. “I ain’t followin’.”

“You still don’t have them.”

“Don’t gotta rub it in.”

“No Pure energies,” she said. “That means Sydney won’t sense you. You can follow us and keep watch, make sure everything’s okay, and he won’t know the difference. Besides, technically you’re an independent consultant, not a full Cleaners employee.”

“Aw, I hate when we start arguin’ technicutleries. That’s just beggin’ for trouble.”

Dani held her hands out. “I can’t do this alone. I need to know I’m not going in by myself.”

Ben tugged and pushed on his cheeks as he mulled this over. “Could work. I’d need to gussy up a bit so’s he don’t spot me right off. You sure you want my help with this, though? You even sure you wanna go through with it?”

“I have to,” Dani said. “If I break my promise, it could make things worse. Give him a reason to lash out, not just against me, but everyone he knows I care about.” At his dubious look, she huffed. “Come on, Ben. You got a second chance. Why can’t he have one?”

Ben and Lucy eyed each other, a mix of displeasure and resignation on their faces.

“You’re really wanting to do this?” Lucy asked.

Dani firmed up. “Yes.”

The other woman sighed. “Hang here for a minute. I’m going to find some rope so I can tie you up and stick you in a closet until you come to your senses.”

A slap made them look over to Jared, who had let his book tumble to the floor.

The teen’s boulder-head turned their way. *“I hear screaming.”*

“Screaming?” Lucy asked. “How many voices? Are they saying anything?”

He whacked the side of his head. *“A man. Maybe a woman, too? No words. Just lots of yelling. Like arguing.”*

Pebbles fell off from him in greater numbers, creating growing piles on the floor. Jared started to rise, but an arm and leg cracked at the joints, sending stone shards flying. He slumped to one side.

“Jared!” Dani ran over and grabbed the kid’s head between her hands. “What’s happening?”

He blinked up at her with gold-flecked eyes. *“I don’t feel so good.”*

His entire body collapsed into a pile of sand, and his head drizzled down through her fingers.