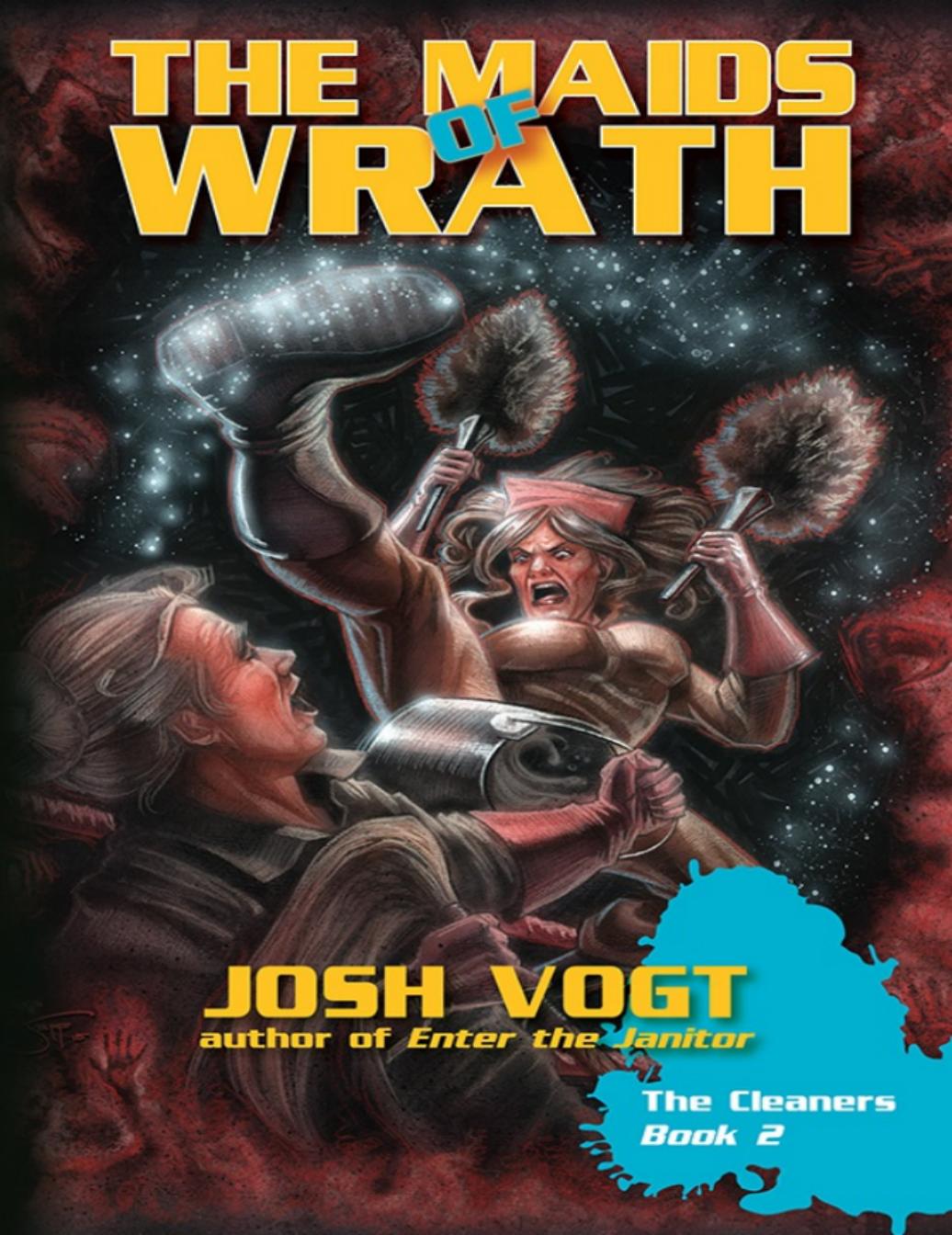


THE MAIDS OF WRATH



JOSH VOGT
author of *Enter the Janitor*

**The Cleaners
Book 2**

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.”*

—A Fantastical Librarian

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

—AudiobookBlast.com

“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

“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 away again.”

—Jennifer Brozek, author of
Apocalypse Girl Dreaming

Book Description

After surviving employee orientation without destroying the city with her new powers, Dani is finally a bonafide Cleaner. Raring to get to work and save the world from Corruption, she's given the critical assignment of ... full-time tools training. After all, what good are magic mops or squeegees if she doesn't know how to properly wield them against Scum? For now, she's stuck in sparring matches where her pride is

getting as bruised as her body.

Ben, her janitor friend and mentor, is also struggling with being sidelined as a “consultant” after the loss of his powers. His only consolation is having gained information that could help solve the mystery of his wife’s death on a Sewer run gone horribly wrong—the same event that temporarily trashed his sanity.

But when a maid goes berserk during a training session and tries to slaughter everyone with a feather duster, something is clearly afoul within the ranks of the Cleaners themselves.

Company procedure brooks no compromise: Identify and quarantine the source of the Corruption at all costs. But who cleans the Cleaners? Especially

when further enraged outbreaks seem to occur at random?

As bodies begin to create quite the messy heap, it's only a matter of time before the whole company is consumed by the madness—taking Dani and Ben down the drain with it.

THE MAIDS OF WRATH

Josh Vogt

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Dedication

*To my sisters, who I love dearly and
who
make me proud to be a big brother.*

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About the Author

**Other WordFire Press Titles by Josh
Vogt**

Chapter One

Dani yelped and stumbled backward as the squeegee bounced off her forehead. A knee knocked the mop out of her hands, followed by a rubber boot which connected with her stomach. This racked up her butt's twentieth rendezvous with the floor of the supernatural sanitation company's training room.

The impact jolted her spine and forearms as she tried to catch herself. It also prompted a plastic crunch. She

groaned and eyed a pants leg pocket, where a wet splotch started leaking through the material.

She undid the zipper and pulled out the cracked remains of a small bottle of sanitation gel. Barely a handful remained inside, and she dribbled this into her palm in the hopes of salvaging something from the mess.

Then she stilled as another squeegee whipped into the floor beside her—except this one sliced through the concrete like an axe splitting a particularly unlucky watermelon. She glowered at this as her attacker spoke.

“Your opponent is not about to pause and let you tidy up after every hit, Miss Hashelheim.”

She grabbed the squeegee handle, thinking she could snap it back in a surprise attack. But her gel-slicked fingers didn't give her a solid grip on the embedded Cleaner weapon.

Between tugs and grunts, she tried to formulate a decent excuse. "I was ... trying to ... coat my hands ... with a substance that'd keep ... any Scum back."

Huffing and admitting defeat via squeegee, she lay back and tried to let her exasperation ebb away. Sweat trickled down her neck as she took inventory of her latest bruises.

While she admired the spotless ceiling of the Cleaners' training facility, a pair of boots—one of which had just

planted its tread on her gut—stamped beside her. The bald head of her sparring instructor came into view as he frowned down at her.

“Miss Hashelheim,” he said in a gravelly tone that would’ve made Sean Connery go weak at the knees, “I don’t run a daycare and this isn’t nap time. Get up and let’s try again.”

“No milk and graham crackers?” she asked. “How about a juice box?”

Her instructor, known to her only as Vern by the white stitching on his brown jumpsuit, retrieved both squeegees. He waved the one he’d hit her with before.

“If this had been properly chanted,” he said, “it would’ve scalped you clear through.”

Dani rubbed her brow as she stood. She'd be walking around with a lump for days. Body twitching in protest, she retrieved her practice mop and settled into a weary stance, one foot back for stability. For a moment, she considered rousing her power and seeing how Vern handled himself in an earthquake or gale. Her Catalyst abilities had been forbidden for this portion of training, though, which she found about as fair as not letting a person use their mouth in a pie-eating contest.

She tried to concentrate, to focus on where the next hit might come from. She could do this. She could—

Squeegees slapped first her right and then her left cheek. Growling, she

jabbed the mop at Vern's impressive stomach.

He twisted like a beer-gut belly-dancer and pinned the mop along his side. Spinning, he yanked the mop out of her hands, jerking her forward so his kick planted in the middle of her back as she stumbled past.

Her left hip took the brunt of her twenty-first tumble. As her cheek cooled against the floor tiles, she debated which would be more humiliating: taking a nap right there or rising to face more defeat.

"C'mon, Dani," someone called from behind her. "Can'tcha at least pretend you're tryin'? It's embarrassin' to watch."

Pushing up, she glared back at Ben,

who stood on the sidelines. The janitor grinned and gave a thumbs-up with his left hand—the only one he had thanks to a supernatural disease which had infected his right arm, and a hungry demigod who'd used the Corrupted flesh as a snack. He kept the right sleeve of his blue jumpsuit pinned to where the limb ended just below the shoulder.

“You want a go with me, old man?” She regained her footing. “I’ll thrash you so hard you’ll end up back in diapers.”

“Naw,” he said. “I won’t be any help in the ring, but I can do plenty good from here.”

Dani faced Vern, who sized up her defense. “Yeah? And what good are you doing right now?”

“Why, I’m playin’ the role of the inevitable distractification.”

She rolled her eyes as she turned to keep Vern in front of her. “That’s real helpful.”

“Mebbe not helpful, but it’s practical.”

“Sure.” She swatted a feint aside. “What’s practical about distraction?”

“Let’s say you’re muckin’ down in the Sewers, moppin’ up a few clogs,” Ben said, “when, oh goodness to gumdrops, a pack of Urmoch leap out all a-sudden, rarin’ to see if you taste like bacon. Whatcha gonna do?”

Vern lunged and chopped a squeegee. Dani blocked the strike for once, but took a kick to the shin which had her

hissing through her teeth. While Vern had more physically in common with a barrel than a ballerina, he maintained the surprising grace of the latter.

“Urmoch have pack mentalities, right?” she said. “I’d figure out which one was the alpha and—”

A glob of water smacked into her face and blurred her vision.

“One of them just threw a turd in your eyes,” Ben said, choked with barely restrained laughter. “You’re blind. Now what?”

She shook her head and swung wildly to block Vern’s thrust. The mop flew from her hands, and she raised her fists. A hand grabbed hers and twisted it into a painful lock. She gasped as Vern spun

her down to her knees. All at once, the water fell from her face, leaving the skin dry and her vision clear as she got within smooching distance of the wart on the instructor's cheek.

He gripped her red hair—what little had regrown so far—and pulled her head back to draw the edge of a squeegee along her throat. Ben hopped into her line of vision and chanted.

“Ding-dong, Dani's dead.”

She scowled, ignoring Vern's proffered hand as she stood and grabbed her mop.

“So mature,” she said.

“Hey, I ain't the one tastin' like bacon, princess.”

She tossed the mop to Ben, who

caught and tucked it under his armpit. He plucked a towel and water bottle out of a side pocket and handed them over.

Dani sniffed the bottle's contents, making sure the water didn't move of its own volition or smell of bleach before taking a swig. Wouldn't be the first time she'd accidentally sucked down an elemental spirit.

Speaking of which, where had Carl dribbled off to after being a poor excuse for a water balloon?

She scanned the training center for Ben's liquid sidekick. This section of HQ looked like a janitorial supply closet and Shaolin dojo had a drunken one-night stand, resulting in a room like neither but the byproduct of both.

Weapon racks lined the walls, stacked with mops, brooms, dusters, vacuum cleaners and other cleaning implements. White tape outlined a dozen sparring rings on the concrete floor, while punching dummies stood in the corners, sporting decapitated heads, gashes and burn marks.

At last, she spotted a puddle rolling across the floor toward Ben. Sensing her attention, the sprite shifted its watery form through a series of geometric shapes. She struggled to decipher Carl's usual method of communication.

Apologies for wetting attractive human female, she thought he said.

“Just be careful where you splash me,” she said. “I don't think elementals

are immune to sexual harassment charges.”

The elemental gurgled along, and Dani raised her eyes from him to the two women sparring a few rings over. She figured they were maids since the air stirred to life around them. From her observations, janitors exhibited more affinity with water, while maids worked better with the wind.

One maid fought with dual feather dusters while the other wielded a bucket and sponge combo. As the bucket-wielder swung high, the second maid darted under the swipe and rammed a shoulder into her opponent's sternum. The first maid reeled back until she slammed into a wall. She coughed and

glared at her partner while rubbing her chest.

“For Purity’s sake, Sherri, tone it down. I haven’t even warmed up yet.”

Sherri snorted and turned a hand to flip her opponent off without letting go of her dusters. However, the air shimmered and blurred the digit until she lowered it, scowling at her own hand.

Ben grumbled. “You gotta be kiddin’ me. The Board expanded the foul-filter to block gestures too? Those muck-minded □□□□□□□□.” His voice fuzzed for a moment, negating whatever contraband insult might tarnish the Cleaners’ shiny reputation.

The other maid returned to the ring, where they resumed trading blows with

increasing vigor.

Putting her back to the maids, Dani looked at Vern.

“I think Ben needs a round or two while I get to be the distraction,” she said.

Ben shook his head. “I got plenty of time bashin’ bones in here, just like every other Cleaner. We had some good ol’ fun, didn’t we, Vern?”

The instructor grimaced. “You were a lousy student. Always rushing in with sloppy technique.” He leveled a finger at Ben. “And don’t assume losing an arm is going to keep you off the roster forever.”

“I suppose I could always be addin’ a few dirty tricks to my repeatatory,” Ben said.

Dani frowned. “Ever consider one of those Word of the Day calendars?”

“Tried one once. I mebbe even remember a few of ’em. Gasconading. Circumlocution. Sesquipedalian.” He grimaced as if tasting something sour. “Just way too much effort waggin’ the tongue over so many syllaballistics.” He winked at Vern as Dani rolled her eyes. “Anyhoo, until my turn comes, I’ll keep on bein’ the wind beneath Dani’s wings.”

Which means he’s going to just keep trying to ruffle my feathers, she thought.

Vern started to retort, but a couple Cleaners entered the room and waved to get his attention.

“We’ll resume in a few minutes,” he

told Dani. “Practice the moves I showed you until I return.”

Dani wiped the sweat from her brow as she headed Ben’s way. He now watched the dueling maids, their fight punctuated by shouts as they tried to jam feathers and soapy water down each other’s throats. A pity the Cleaners didn’t let their work become public knowledge. Dani could’ve made a decent side income by selling videos of their training bouts to MMA entertainment channels. Of course, that’d probably raise a whole new social debate: Could household chores make kids more prone to violence?

As she sidled up to Ben, Dani eyed the janitor, looking for any signs of

discomfort. The cursed infection that had claimed his arm had also prematurely aged him; when they first met, she'd thought him in his seventies, rather than his true age of thirty-five. When the curse had been literally sucked out of him, the damage had also been reversed, restoring his middle-aged physique, including a healthy crop of black hair and a steely glint to his blue eyes.

But despite his assurances of feeling great, she occasionally glimpsed his former grandfatherly visage. A deeper wrinkle around the eyes when he smiled, a sag to his cheeks when he got lost in thought.

Catching her look, he grinned. "What's with the frowny face? Don't tell

me I actually got to you with that little Carl-catapultin' stunt."

She took the mop back from him and placed it on the nearest rack. "Ben, why am I spending my summer vacation focusing on all this Cleaners kung fu? I should be working on getting better control of my powers instead all this wax-on, wax-off business."

"Actually, you won't learn how to operate the floor waxers until after you get a handle on joustin' with mops."

She sighed. "That's not the point I was trying to make. I don't need tools to summon my ability."

"Your body and gear are just as important as your powers," he said. "Just 'cause you can conjure localized

natural disasters don't mean that's the only thing you oughta be ready to do. What if some Scum confronts you in a public area, where usin' your abilities would put innocent lives at risk?"

"I'd call in backup, I guess. Get a scrub-team on the scene."

"And if they didn't arrive in time?"

"All the better reason to work on fine-tuning my powers. That way I can make the manifestations more precise and reduce any collateral damage. I got a really tiny tornado worked up the other day. I mean, it could've spun in the palm of your—"

A cry rose from one of the maids, followed by the sound of a body hitting the floor. Dani and Ben spun to see the

bucket-wielder sprawled on her back, blood streaming from a gash above one eye. Sherri stood over her, chest heaving, teeth bared as if to bite.

The prone maid started to rise. “Sherri, you—”

Sherri lashed out with a foot, and the other maid twisted just enough to take the kick in the ribs. She gasped and curled in on herself. Her head lolled as she fumbled for her bucket, which had fallen out of reach.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Vern’s shout echoed off the walls, enough command behind it that Dani nearly stammered a reflexive apology.

Sherri snapped her gaze at Vern, naked fury in her eyes, a primal fire that

made Dani think of a rabid dog being teased with a slab of raw meat.

She gripped Ben's arm in alarm. "Ben, I don't think—"

The maid flung one of her feather dusters at Vern. As it flew through the air, the feathers snapped together into a black spearhead. Vern hollered as he ducked the missile, which plunged into the shoulder of one of the Cleaners behind him. The man went down with a scream.

Sherri swept her other duster around, and the air spun into a whirlwind with her at the center. She raised the duster above her head, where the feathers gleamed like razor blades, poised to plunge into the maid at her feet.

“No!” Dani and Ben echoed each other’s cry as they rushed to intercept.

Chapter Two

Ben moved a hair faster than Dani, long legs working in his favor. Grabbing a small plunger off a rack, he dashed toward the frenzied maid, who'd gotten at least one solid stab in. He threw the plunger with all his strength. It flew true and stuck to the side of Sherri's head.

Still got the good ol' aim, bucko, he thought.

With a shriek of rage, she reared and yanked the plunger away. Unfortunately,

the tool wasn't chanted and he couldn't make it do anything fancy without his powers. Ben grabbed the dropped bucket and charged ahead, figuring he could at least stick it on her head and play the bongos until she got tired of dancing.

As he came close, however, the air swirled faster. It blasted into his chest and shoved him back onto his heels. Straining against the gusts, he checked on both sides. Vern and Dani leaned into the wind as well, unable to push closer either.

“Dani!” Her head jerked his way as he shouted. “Cut her off.”

She braced herself while narrowing her eyes at Sherri, searching for the core

of energy the maid used to sustain the gale. Then Dani made a chopping motion with one hand. The whirlwind died off. Ben sprinted in, bucket poised to wallop.

Sherri spun at him, snarling, eyes wide and glistening. She slashed for his throat; he blocked with the bucket. The feathers sliced through the bottom half, leaving him with ... well ...

There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza ...

Ben pouted as Sherri circled for another stab. "Hey now, missy. This was my favorite bucket of the last five seconds. We had good times."

He threw the bucket remnants, which merely clipped her shoulder. She thrust

at his stomach and he lurched back. His reinforced jumpsuit turned the cut aside, but he had to keep backpedaling as she rushed in to fillet him.

Then Vern performed his award-winning impression of a bulldozer and clobbered her from the side. Sherri fell, but rolled through and came up facing the fighting instructor. The feathers on her duster popped apart, and she flicked it at him as if in dismissal. A gust of wind lifted Vern and flipped him backward into a rack of training dummies. He bellowed and struggled to untangle himself from the unexpected orgy of rubber bodies.

Using the distraction, Ben grabbed Sherri's left wrist, which clutched the

duster. He tried to yank her to the floor, where he could slam her hand down and force her to release the weapon. She pulled her other arm back for a punch and he raised his right arm to block.

Then he remembered—no right arm. Just dandy.

The roundhouse slammed into the side of his head. His jaw popped and all noise went distant, as if he'd plugged his ears with cotton swabs.

He managed to keep hold of her duster-wielding arm, and wrestled to keep it from coring out his heart while Sherri clawed at his face. Random blasts of air knocked him off-balance as he hopped around, dragging her into a merry-go-round of physical abuse.

Where was Dani?

Sherri grabbed the front of his jumpsuit, spun with a flurry of wind, and slammed him against the wall. The knock dizzied him for a second, time enough for her to stab at his face. He halted the cut an inch from the skin and stared into the maid's crazed eyes. Her face went purple as she strained to pin him like an oversized butterfly on a corkboard.

Her cheeks puffed as the duster edged closer. His vision narrowed until he saw nothing more than the gleaming feathers, chanted sharp enough to dice bone. The tip tickled his Adam's apple as he swallowed.

“Yo, Sherri!”

The maid looked to the side in time to take a faceful of wet mop. Screaming, she released Ben and reeled back as Dani whacked her across the face again. Dani held on to the mop handle as the cloth tendrils wrapped around Sherri's head like octopus tentacles, muffling the maid's cries. Sherri cut blindly with the duster, until one of the tendrils snagged her wrist and twisted it hard enough for her to drop the weapon.

Ben wheezed as Sherri tried to tear the mop off her face. Dani used the handle to keep the maid at a distance while forcing her into the middle of the room. Sherri dropped to her knees, and then her side as her struggles weakened.

At last, the maid fell flat, hands and

feet twitching.

Dani jerked the mop, and it popped off Sherri's head with a sucking noise. The maid remained conscious but sluggish as she tried to rise. Dani dropped the mop and leaped on her, a knee to the back driving Sherri down while Dani clamped her wrists behind her.

“Get a bag and some ties,” Ben shouted to Vern, who'd tossed the last dummy off. “We gotta neutralize her. You two,” he pointed at the other Cleaners who'd watched the fight in shock. “Get the nearest handyman in here and then shoot a flare up the Chairman's nostrils so he knows there's been an emergency.”

The Cleaners yelled into their handheld radios as they ran out. Vern limped over to a supply cabinet tucked into a corner of the facility. Ben joined Dani, taking one of the maid's arms so she could pin the woman's legs.

Once Vern returned with a black garbage bag and zip-ties, they drew the bag over Sherri's head, cinched it around the neck, and then hog-tied her. The garbage bag was a tool they normally used on Scum, chanted to allow the prisoner to breathe while dampening their powers. Staring down at the maid, Ben recalled when he and Dani had been similarly restrained. There were tricks to defeating such security measures—ones he'd used to

spring them last time, in fact—but fortunately not too many Cleaners were privy to these.

At last, they all stood and exchanged worried looks. Dani's brow crinkled as she scanned him.

“You okay?” she asked.

He touched his throat where the duster had brushed the skin, and the fingers came away bloody. Ben grimaced and wiped them on his jumpsuit.

“Totally peachy, princess.”

“You sure? She had you by the scruff there.” Ben glared, and she raised her hands. “Just concerned, is all.”

He sighed and stared down at the maid, who writhed at their feet. Not long

ago, he'd have been able to handle this outburst alone without so much as a stubbed toe. Once one of the Cleaners' best employees, he'd wielded mop and spray bottle alike to wipe out Scum and Corrupt manifestations. But the Pure energies he'd once possessed had been stripped from him along with the condition that had almost claimed his life. A price he once thought he'd be okay paying. In the months since, though, he found himself increasingly bothered by the loss. For one thing, it kept his status as a Cleaner in limbo, since only empowered folks could technically be part of their ranks. Nobody seemed to know quite what to do with him beyond letting him train and educate the fresher

recruits.

He noticed Dani still watching him, her normally bright emerald eyes shaded with worry, and made himself straighten and smile. No need to get her concerned. He might be powerless, but he didn't have to be helpless.

“Peachy,” he repeated, forcing more conviction into his voice. “Thanks for savin’ my □□□—er, yankin’ my hide outta the fire there.”

“Eh.” She shrugged. “I lost track of who’s saved who a while back. Don’t make me start running a tally all over again.”

He chuckled. “Sure thing. But thankya all the same.” He eyed the mop she’d used on the maid, the same one she’d

held to spar with Vern. “How’dja work the mop like that? I didn’t think it was chanted.”

She picked up the mop and shook it until the water soaking the cloth strings drained into her hand. She tossed Carl his way, and Ben cupped the bubbling elemental against his chest. They all looked at the maid and then at each other in concern.

“So what just happened?” Dani asked. “Some kind of Scum spell?”

“If it is, I ain’t gonna be able to sniff it out,” Ben said, feeling a pang of frustration at yet another lost skill. “Either of you sense anythin’ mucky?”

Dani and Vern concentrated on the maid for a few moments, but shook their

heads.

“Nothing,” Vern muttered. “If she’d contracted anything in the field, it would’ve been detected and neutralized on re-entering HQ. No spells I can see or smell.”

Dani’s eyes widened. “Ben, wait. Something *is* off—”

Sherri bucked and flopped around, almost tripping Dani before she caught her balance and retreated a step. She raised the mop, ready to knock the maid senseless if she had any fight left in her.

Ben put his arm out to stop her. Sherri’s movements had nothing to do with trying to get free. He could tell that much. They were mindless thrashings of panic and agony.

“You’re right. Somethin’s wrong,” he said. “Get the bag off her head.”

“What? But Ben, we just—”

“Do it!”

Vern knelt and reached to undo the bag. Before he could, however, Sherri gave one more jerk and went limp. Vern paused, and they waited for several heartbeats without the maid resuming her struggle.

Then he loosed the bag and tore it free. Dani gasped and even Ben, who’d seen his share of nastiness in this line of work, had to breathe out slowly to quell a surge of nausea.

Sherri’s face had frozen in a twisted mask of rage as she stared up at them. Her bulging eyes had glazed over and

bloody foam dribbled out from the corner of her mouth. Not so much as a twitch came from her cheeks or chest.

Dani pressed knuckles to her mouth.

“Oh, □□□ ... is she ...?”

Vern pressed fingers first to Sherri’s neck and then her wrist. His expression darkened.

“Dead,” he said.

Chapter Three

Dani struggled to keep her composure as all-too-recent memories assailed her. She could only think of another maid who'd died ... thanks to her.

During what she now thought of as her “employee orientation,” she and Ben had wound up in a desolate realm known as the Gutters; they'd been accompanied by several others, including a maid named Patty and a rather disturbing creature that called itself a *gnash*. Dani

had convinced the gnash to guide them to a safe haven in exchange for its life. Along the way, though, she'd momentarily left the beast unsupervised, at which point it had turned Patty into a final meal.

Despite Ben's assurances that Patty's death hadn't been Dani's fault, the guilt still gnawed at her. This death tore the emotional scab wide again.

Shaking herself from the memory, she recalled that Sherri wasn't the only one hurt here. She ran to the other maid who lay motionless in a pool of blood.

Dani sighed in relief to find the maid still alive despite the mess. The maid rasped shallow breaths and had gone ashen. She whimpered as Dani probed

the wounds, trying to recall what college studies she'd taken in preparation for med school.

Deep lacerations, possibly a punctured lung. No major arteries hit, it looked like, otherwise she probably would've already bled out. But internal bleeding would still be an issue.

She looked up to see Ben and Vern hurrying toward a newcomer—a thin, older gentleman who'd just entered the room.

She called out. “Ben, this woman's got to get to an emergency room. She could need surgery if she's going to make it.”

He raised a finger, urging patience. “I'll do you one better.”

The men exchanged a quick greeting, then Vern slipped out while Ben thumbed Dani's way. She moved aside as the newcomer hurried over and took her place by the injured maid.

While clothed in the same zippered jumpsuit nearly every Cleaner wore, the man moved with a professional and precise air that set him apart from most. The name on his uniform read: *Lopez*.

Lopez checked the maid over with measuring and probing techniques Dani recognized from medical texts she'd pored over. However, after the initial inspection, his procedure became anything but textbook.

He shifted around to kneel by the maid's head and clasped it between his

hands. Then he began to sway from side to side while humming and chanting words just below Dani's threshold of comprehension. While his eyes remained closed, a green glow seeped out from between his eyelids, and a faint verdant aura lit the air around his hands and the maid's body.

Dani realized Ben had come up beside her, and she leaned over to whisper.

“What's he doing?”

“Lopez is a handyman,” Ben said. “They're the finest you're ever gonna find at fixin' things—and people—if they ain't too far gone.”

“A handyman? Isn't that what ... you know ...”

“What Sydney was before goin’ Scumwise?”

She grimaced at his naming the entropy mage. Not only had Sydney been a flamboyant flirt and deceptive scoundrel with boundary issues, he’d also tried to hand her over to a cult. Not to mention she still owed him a date—a bargain she would’ve wholly regretted, except for the fact it had kept him from claiming an innocent life.

Ben nodded. “Yup. Handymen are almost as rare talents as you Catalysts, but there’s more of ’em ’round ’cause they don’t tend to blow themselves up before we get to ’em.”

Dani sighed. “Lucky them.”

“Even then,” Ben said, “it’s hard to

find one as strong as Lopez here. He's got a real knack for the work. Been at it almost since he was a bouncin' babe."

Lopez smiled softly at hearing his name, but didn't pause in tending to the injured maid. Keeping one hand on her head, he tugged a small cloth out a pocket with the other and began patting it over her. Blood soaked into it without leaving a stain.

Not for the first time, Dani questioned the wisdom of the Cleaners keeping so much power contained within the company alone. What hospital couldn't benefit from magical rags to keep people and areas free from infection? How many more lives might be saved if handymen applied their

abilities in disaster relief areas, rather than remaining hidden behind the scenes?

She closed her eyes and reached out with her power, trying to get a sense of what he was doing. The power snaked out of her, questing along to form an internal vision of the surrounding area, along with detecting any Pure or Corrupt magic at work. She sensed the earth beneath the floor, the recycled air, the electricity coursing through the lights and wires in the walls.

An emerald light suffused Lopez's form, making Dani think of a luminescent creature from the ocean depths. This light flowed along the maid's bones and veins until it bathed her entire body.

Suddenly, the light flared, and Dani grunted as her senses were shoved back into her body. She opened her eyes to find Lopez staring at her. Power dripped from his eyes like green tears and fell onto the maid's face, which looked a bit calmer, the skin a shade healthier.

Lopez shook his head slightly, as if Dani had intruded on an intimate moment. Then his eyes closed again, and he resumed his chanting.

Ben glanced at her. "Tried to take a peek, didja? Shoulda warned you. It's touchy work, and some handymen can get their knickers twisted pretty tight if you stick your nose in. Like bumpin' the elbow of a doc holdin' a scalpel while doin' brain surgery."

“Oh.” Dani held hands out to the handyman to show she’d meant no harm. “Sorry. I didn’t know.”

Lopez’s expression didn’t change.

Ben cleared his throat. “Wouldn’t recommend tryin’ to chat ’em up while they’re workin’, either.”

Embarrassed, she shuffled away and Ben followed.

“Handymen, huh?” she asked. “Don’t any women get this kind of power? Seems a bit sexist if the Pantheon only imbues men with healing abilities.”

“Course ladyfolks can get the same powers,” he said. “But you gotta admit, handyperson just ain’t got the same ring to it.”

“Hmph. Glad to see we’re still living

in the twentieth century.”

As Ben opened his mouth to reply, a voice echoed through the room.

“I’ve received reports of a disturbance.”

Dani jumped as one of the walls shimmered and turned glassy, revealing a marble-tiled office with a steel desk at the center. The man behind the desk wore a white three-piece suit in sharp contrast to his ebony skin and dark eyes. A white fedora hung on a nearby hat rack.

Francis, the current Chairman of the Board, frowned at the scene, his gaze almost as cutting as his chin and cheekbones. He leaned forward, larger-than-life, and propped his head on a fist.

“Anyone wish to explain what I’m seeing?”

Ben stepped up. “If we had an explanation, mebbe so.” He tilted his head toward the corpse. “This maid here—Sherri, I think—went full-on, bone-chewin’ ballistic. Mebbe thought the color scheme here needed a little more red to liven up the joint.”

Francis sighed. *“As always, Janitor Benjamin, your humor is ill-placed.”*

“Naw, it ain’t. I always know right where it is.”

“It’s really all we know,” Dani said. “One minute, things are totally normal ...” She thought for a second. “As normal as this place ever gets, that is. But the next second, we’re fighting

for our lives. Even after we subdued Sherri, it was like she went into some epileptic fit that pushed her over the edge. She died before we could do anything.”

Francis’ scowl deepened and he took notes with a golden pen as they related the details of the fight.

“Handyman Lopez? Do you have any insights?”

Dani hesitated, wondering if she should warn the Chairman against talking during the healing process. Then a voice spoke behind her.

“No, Chairman.”

Dani jumped, not realizing Lopez had finished with the maid and now stood by her. He brushed silvery hair off his brow

and gazed at Francis with gentle brown eyes as he spoke softly, his voice dusted by a slight Hispanic accent. “Chairman, this other maid will live, though I urge that she be transferred to Maintenance for at least a couple days. She has suffered intense trauma—not all of it physical—and needs ongoing care.”

“Make sure to file the proper benefits paperwork. Do you have any idea as to what might’ve caused this violent outburst?”

Lopez raised his hands in a helpless gesture. “I’ve not had a chance for anything beyond a cursory examination, but detect no sign of physical or mental Corruption in the injured. I will have to perform a full plumbing before I can

provide any real analysis of the dead.”

Francis nodded. “*See to it.*”

As Lopez left to deal with the patient and body, Dani stepped forward.

“I’d like to volunteer to help.”

Francis fixed on her. “*Help with what, precisely, Janitor Danielle? I’m not sure how your particular skill set would aid the handyman, unless you’ve found a way to resurrect the dead via conjured lightning storms. While I understand you might wish to put your schooling to use, that isn’t as applicable here.*”

“Not that,” she said. “I want to help figure out why this happened. Why Sherri went loco all of a sudden. You’re planning on doing more than just a

magical autopsy,” she glanced over at the handyman, “or whatever plumbing is, right?”

Francis checked a paper on his desk. *“I believe you’ve been assigned to tools training for the next week. I have many others able to handle an internal employee investigation.”*

“Sir, I feel strongly about this. I can do more if you let me.”

She fought to not squirm under his gaze, always disliking how the Chairman could make it feel like she was trying to use the situation for personal gain at the company’s expense. He considered her for a long moment before leaning back in his chair.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do

with the loss of Maid Patricia in the Gutters, would it?"

Dani looked aside, wishing he hadn't homed in on her motives so easily. Was she that transparent?

"Partly," she admitted. "I just want to feel like I'm contributing something. I can help, really."

"I'm sorry. There are others trained specifically for this situation. Perhaps in the future." His focus shifted. *"Janitor Benjamin."*

Ben's face lit up, and Dani fought down a rush of jealousy. Why should he get picked over her? He didn't even have his powers anymore. She kept herself from voicing the complaint, though, knowing it wasn't fair to the

janitor and that it wouldn't do her any good. Once Francis set his mind, it took an act of God—or at least the Board—to change it.

“Yup?” Ben asked.

“Prepare a report of the confrontation and have it on my desk by this evening. I'd like your unique perspective on the events and it will give you something to do in your consultant role. In the meantime, I'll be assigning Ascendant Jackson a team to look into this further. That's all.”

“Ah. Sure ...” At Francis' look, Ben chopped a salute. “Sir, yes, Chairman, sah!”

Francis faded from view and the wall returned to whitewashed cinder blocks.

Dani and Ben sighed simultaneously and then looked at each other in mutual annoyance.

“Looks like we’re both gettin’ tossed the table scraps,” he said.

“You’d think after what we did for him, he’d give us a little leeway.” She turned toward the exit, but Ben caught her shoulder.

“Dani, Francis is just—”

“Doing his job,” she said, more harshly than intended. “Just like everyone else around here is supposed to, including me.” She faced him, fists planted on hips. “I’d really hoped when you announced me as a full-time employee that I’d actually be able to, you know, use my abilities out in the

field versus puttering around here all day.”

“Putterin’? It’s the same old trainin’ every Cleaner goes through when they’re brought in.”

“Well, maybe there should be some new training procedures,” she said. “Plus some new gender neutral job titles.”

“And at least you’re gettin’ paid for all this so-called putterin’ now.” His hand slipped off her shoulder. “I know you wanna be all go-go hero girl. Trust me, I get how that feels. But you still gotta be certified with the equipment before you can be assigned any major field work.”

“Bull.”

Ben blinked. Then he grinned. “Oh, look at you, princess. Slippin’ past the foul-filter all sneaky like. I shoulda thought of that.”

Dani waved the trick aside. “When I first got recruited, you were all about shoving me out into the field to get first-hand experience. Why are you so eager to keep me locked up, learning how to hold a stick properly?”

“Don’t be blamin’ me for that first bit. That was Destin’s doin’, remember? He figured stickin’ you with me might getcha exposed to the Ravishing. Make your abilities more controllable-like with his Chairman powers.”

“But that’s not why you’re taking this tack now, is it?” She leaned in, forcing

him to meet her eyes. “Is it because you can’t go out there with me?” Her anger flared as he shifted guiltily. “That’s it, isn’t it? You feel responsible for me, and you think if I go out without you by my side, I’m not going to be able to handle things.”

He stiffened and glared at her. “It’s nothin’ like that. I’m worried for you, sure as shootin’, but don’t think I’d ever hold you back just ’cause I ain’t able to do the work I want, either.”

“Well that’s what I am thinking,” she said. “Honestly, Ben, despite what we’ve gone through, it’s like you still think I’m a little girl and you have to be my grandfather, mostly minus the old man smell.”

“Dani, I—” One eye twitched. “What do you mean, *mostly*?”

She started to chuckle, but jolted at a sudden thought. “□□□□! I totally forgot I promised Jared I’d drop by today. I have to go, otherwise I’ll miss visiting hours. Want to join me?”

He looked ready to force the issue, but then pressed his lips tight. “I gotta write that report, and you know how much Francis loves his paperwork. The longer the better.”

“Lucky you. Death by a thousand paper cuts.”

“Say hiya to the kiddo for me.”

She left the training room and headed for her quarters to clean up before going to the hospital. She strode along, joining

the foot traffic of janitors, plumbers, maids, and the occasional white-suited Ascendant who deigned to mingle with the common sanitation workers.

After she'd been inducted into the Cleaner ranks, she'd asked for a map of HQ, having gotten lost more than a few times in the seemingly endless stretch of halls, storage rooms, and employee facilities. Ben had just laughed and told her about the team that had, a century before, set out to chart the whole of HQ—and hadn't been seen since. Rumors had it they still wandered the compound. A few of the more superstitious Cleaners occasionally held vigils with propane fueled torches, lighting rarely-traveled halls in hopes of bringing the waywards

home.

And this was only the stateside operational center, not to mention the European and Asian headquarters. HQ, she'd learned early on, wasn't a terribly cohesive structure, as much as they tried to suggest this through company organizational charts—some of which would make an Escher painting the perfect semblance of sanity by comparison.

This branch was anchored in Denver, Colorado. Ben had tried to explain it once, saying the main portion existed “someplace a bit sideways to normal reality. I submitted a suggestion to officially call it wonkified space, but I'm pretty sure the Employee Suggestion

box is just a disguised incinerator.”

“You just get used to it,” he’d said, waving vaguely. “Sooner or later. Hopefully. Or mebbe you’ll find that lost survey team and bring ’em home, yeah? Focus on where you want to end up, and you’ll get there like gravy goin’ downhill.”

As she walked, she reviewed the disturbing events in the training facility and tried to imagine what would turn someone so vicious. Had there been bad blood between the two maids? A quarrel over a man? Maybe a lovers’ spat gone nasty? Those explanations seemed too simplistic for Sherri’s savagery, plus her unexplained death.

Hopefully Lopez would be able to

uncover an explanation while getting the other maid back on her feet. Maybe if Dani asked real nice, the handyman would let her watch over his shoulder when she had time off. She wouldn't use her abilities, of course. Totally mundane observation. Did handymen employ nurses or orderlies?

She let the thoughts fade into the background as another turn brought her into a familiar stretch of employee quarters. The doors all looked the same but she recognized hers by the pink smiley face sticker she'd placed on it.

She entered the sparsely furnished room she'd been assigned. Besides a bed and nightstand with a few tattered paperback novels, the main piece of

decoration was the terrarium on the dresser, where an orange and red lizard lounged on a heat rock.

Tetris, her pet bearded dragon, cocked an eye her way in his usual inquisitive manner. Some girls wanted to own a pony. Some girls wanted to be a princess. Dani, however, had wanted to prove to her parents she could overcome her germophobic ways and deal with normal life enough to get through med school. Tetris had been her compromise, the one thing she'd learned to care about beyond her hygiene routines and gallons of sani-gel. Funny how a lizard could become a mental and emotional anchor—and funny how much she feared losing that anchor now that normal life

involved maids going mad and buildings without blueprints.

A little voice rose in the back of her mind, listing various reptilian diseases that might claim Tetris' life: *Herpesvirus. Septicemia. Adenovirus ...*

Shutting down that old habit hard, she reminded herself that so long as she kept her pet within HQ, no infections could threaten him. Her work here protected him. The work helped her as well, giving her the ability to fight back against the filthy germs that once held her captive in terror. In turn, she could help others more directly with her Catalyst abilities. A circle of sanitized life.

The lizard scuttled off his rock to

claw at the glass, stubby tongue licking the pane.

Ignoring his immediate pleas for attention—or food, more likely—Dani slipped into the bathroom. After showering, she shrugged back into her uniform, which always smelled fresh after she took it off for a few minutes. After putting on thick gloves, she dropped a handful of mealworms into Tetris' cage and watched as the lizard chased them down. She tickled him under the chin once he finished the last one.

“Need anything while I'm out?”

He gently bit the end of her thumb.

“You know I can't afford to get you a lady friend right now. Maybe once I get

a raise; so figure somewhere between the next five and fifty years, 'kay?"

Once his water bowl was refilled, she stripped off the gloves, grabbed a fresh bottle of sani-gel, and slathered it on her hands for a full minute to satisfy the urge that'd been building ever since the maid incident. A knot of tension loosed in her gut as she breathed the fumes deep.

Sure. Rationally, she knew her new identity as a Cleaner combined with the suit shielded her from mundane contamination plus a range of Corrupt influence—but some things in life just refused to be rational. The gel remained a concession to this, a compulsion she might never leave behind her whole life.

With new gloves secured, she left the room and walked until she reached a hallway which dead-ended in a full-length mirror. She reached out and tapped the glass, letting a bit of Pure energy trickle from her to activate the portal. The glassways not only provided external access from various locations around the city, but also acted as portals between divisions such as Supplies, Maintenance, and the Recycling Center, where they kept imprisoned Scum and other nasties.

The glass shimmered and bulged, forming a translucent, feminine face. Glittering eyes focused on her.

“Destination?” the window-watcher asked.

“Saint Joseph Hospital,” she said.
“Containment ward.”

“Employee authorization required.”

Dani placed her palm on the glass. A chime sounded, and she shivered as a scan coursed through her. The chilly wave washed over her scalp, across her shoulder blades, and out the soles of her feet as the window-watcher inspected her down to bone and neuron for any sign of contamination. It left a tingling sensation in its wake, along with a metallic aftertaste which made Dani feel like she'd French-kissed a battery.

“Pass through.” The face smoothed out, leaving the mirror featureless once more.

She took a deep breath to brace

herself. She had yet to get used to traveling through the glassways. It wasn't just the brief discomfort. It was also the sensation of traveling much farther than the single step it took to go from one side to the other; a hop, a skip, and a jump over an empty space the size of the Grand Canyon, somehow landing on the far edge rather than tumbling into a bottomless pit. She'd woken a couple nights in a cold sweat, having relived the sensation in her dreams, but with messier results.

Stop being a wuss, she told herself. Nobody else complains about this. Besides, it's better than driving across town. I hate having to file reimbursements for fuel.

She plunged into the glassy surface. The frigid border swept over her, and for an instant she glimpsed an infinite corridor, with countless reflections of herself along the sides, each frozen in mid-step.

The other end of the corridor snapped her way. The space between contracted and the alternate versions of herself began to vanish. Dani braced to complete the step, as her momentum would propel her forward when she emerged.

As the opposing end of the glassway closed the gap, the nearest reflection on Dani's right reached out and grabbed her arm, which burst into flame.

Chapter Four

Ben frowned at Dani's back until the door slid shut behind her. He glanced around, made sure Lopez remained distracted with the wounded maid, and then plucked at his jumpsuit collar for a quick sniff.

Nothin'. She was just messin' with me. He took a deeper whiff. *Right? Right.*

He slipped over to the handyman and watched him work for a few minutes.

Already a few gashes on the maid's stomach had sealed over and her breathing had evened. Nothing more Ben could do here.

“You got this?” he asked.

Lopez nodded without looking up.

Ben cast a worried look over at Sherri's body. He felt half-blinded without his ability to sense Corrupt energies anymore. There could've been charbeetles festering in her bowels, for all he knew, and the first hint he'd get would be when they burned their way out to cover the room in flaming gunk.

He patted Lopez on the back. “Keep me in the loop, yeah?”

He headed for the exit and slammed face-first into the door, which had failed

to open. Reeling, he slapped a hand to his nose. His grunt of pain echoed through the training room.

“Sonuva ...” He bit down on the curse before the foul-filter activated. After making sure his nose remained intact, he glared at the door and tried a variation. “Son of a bloody biscuit!”

The substitute swear didn't help alleviate the pain nearly as well, but it was better than nothing. Maybe Dani's tactic wasn't a bad idea. He needed to expand on his vehement vocabulary to get around the spell in more creative and satisfying ways.

Lopez looked over in concern, but Ben waved him away, trying not to flush with embarrassment. He eyed the

uncooperative door as he eased his hand into a side pocket, and then groaned when he touched glassy shards.

“Aw, crap-on-a-stick.”

After dumping the shards out onto the floor, he knelt and stirred a finger through them, seeing if there was any chance of restoring the access sigil. No such luck. It must've been shattered during the fight; not a glimmer of imbued energy remained.

“For Purity’s sake ...” He grabbed his handheld radio and tuned it to the proper channel before clicking the button to speak. “Janitor Ben reportin’ a little equipment malfunction. Monty, you readin’ me?”

Static crackled for a few seconds

before a voice cut through.

“What’d you break this time, Ben? We’ve had a bet running.”

Ben glowered at the speaker. “It’s my access sigil. Smashed to glitter.”

“Yeah? What were you using it for? Hammering nails into your thick skull?”

“Har. If you’re wantin’ me to drop by and dole out the details, I’m gonna need a way to actually get to you. Whattaya say?”

“I’ll requisition a new one. But it’ll be a day or two.”

“You’re kiddin’, right? I need a sigil to just walk around here. I’m not sittin’ in one spot for two days until you can chant a new one.”

“Hey, I’ve got a laundry list to work through that’d put a dry cleaners at a tar pit to shame. You should’ve taken better care of the one you were issued. And you know this new one will—”

“Come out of my pay. I figured.” He leaned against the wall. “Fine. Dock me whatever’s due, but can’tcha get it to me before I starve to death? Or gotta use the little boy’s room?”

“I’ll send someone to get you,” Monty said. *“Keep your britches bleached.”*

“Do you know how much that’d itch?” Ben asked, before hearing the click which signaled Monty had gone off-channel. He sighed and hooked the radio on his belt. Francis had provided

the first access sigil after Ben lost his powers, since all of HQ's doors and glassways activated only when a Cleaner's Pure energies were sensed—a security measure to keep Scum from infiltrating the place, and also how management tracked everyone in the facility.

He pushed aside the temptation to call Lopez over to open the exit. Never a good idea to interrupt a handyman's healing. Sitting beside the door, he snagged Carl's spray bottle and held the water sprite at eye level.

“Learn any new jokes lately, buddy?”

An hour passed as Carl regaled him with humorous one-offs, which often involved birds for some reason,

especially seagulls and pelicans. It was one aspect of elemental humor Ben had never quite comprehended.

Then footsteps sounded outside right before the door slid open.

“Bout time.”

Ben jumped up and nearly rammed into the heavysset woman who planted herself in his way. Putting a thick fist on a thicker hip, she slurped from a steaming coffee mug, which read *This is Not Your Day*. Dark brown eyes stared at him with hostile curiosity. Ben smoothed down his uniform as he recognized the other janitor, and Carl bumbled through a series of shapes which roughly translated to: *Don't even think of trying to blame me for this one.*

They sized each other up while Ben tried to figure out the best way to break the ice—or iceberg in this case. He settled for a smile and wave as he secured the spray bottle on his hip.

“Heya, Lu. Good to see you. Alive that is. And not tryin’ to kill me.”

Lucy didn’t twitch an eyelash. She’d been around since he and Karen first joined the Cleaners, and had worked with them on countless jobs over the years. They’d developed a comfortable camaraderie which had been lost after the job which left Ben infected and Karen deceased. Like everyone else, Lucy had kept her distance after he got out of quarantine.

The last time they’d been toe-to-toe,

she'd headed up a team intent on keeping him and Dani locked down—albeit on Destin's orders before the former Chairman had been exposed as Corrupted. Ben had exchanged a few blows with her before pulling a downright dirty trick, even for an old dog like him. He'd kissed her. Of course, instead of slipping his tongue down her throat, Ben had given her a mouthful of Carl so the elemental could choke her unconscious.

Not the sort of thing anyone would hold a grudge about, right?

At last, Lucy took a heavy swallow of coffee and licked at the black grains between her teeth. She spoke with the lightest of Latino accents, which Ben

knew only surfaced when she was holding down her emotions something fierce. “Why is it anytime an internal emergency is reported, I just know you’re involved?”

“Y’know, I’ve been thinkin’ the anti-Ben bias is kinda becomin’ a thing ’round here ...”

She looked past him. “What’s this I hear about a maid trying to bite people’s giblets off?”

He turned and waved into the training room. “Why don’tcha take a look?”

Lucy craned her neck to see better. She sucked in a breath.

“That bad?”

“One dead, another hangin’ on, thanks to Lopez. No idea what triggered it yet,

not that I have much to do with that kinda work anymore.”

“Right. Well, I’m sure if it was important enough, they’d have sent a memo around to all the grunts by now.”

“Right. ’Cause grunts always get them important memos.” He hopped to one side and spoke to the space he’d just occupied. “So how’ve you been, Ben?” He hopped back. “Me? Why thankya, Lu, for carin’ enough to ask. Things’ve been shook up a might bit since we last butted buckets.” Ben lifted his arm to display himself. “Came out a little worse-for-wear, as you might see. But everythin’ else is in the right place, doin’ the right thing.”

Lucy appeared unamused. “And the

girl? Whats her name?"

"Dani. She's doin' just fine. You two should get reacquainted. Mebbe go get your toenails painted and have a slumber party."

Lucy pressed her plump lips together. "They won't release the official reports, but everyone says you got rid of Destin."

"Not so much got rid of. More like ___"

"Rumor also has it the Board offered you the Chairmanship and you gave it over to Francis."

Ben tried to edge around her, but he would've had to leave his skeleton behind to squeeze through the gap between her and the door jamb. Her gaze and stance didn't budge. In another life,

he could've pictured her as a drill sergeant. And not the shouty type either. One that could make the military minions want to demote themselves just by going still and fixing them with a particular look.

“Since when're you goin' 'round trustin' rumors? Look, I got an appointment—”

She took another slow chug of her drink. “Same rumors also say you're powerless now, since you're needing an access sigil and all that.”

“I ...” Ben sagged. “Gossipin' just ain't good for company morale.”

Frosty humor twinkled in her eyes. “I could have some real fun with this.”

“Now that'd be downright immature

of you, don'tcha think? Ain't you a big girl?"

She drained her mug and then peered at the contents at the bottom as if divining her next move from the settled patterns of the grinds.

"I've always been against cruelty toward helpless animals," she said.

"Should I be feelin' relieved or insulted?"

A shrug. "Eh. Room for both."

They stood side-by-side, Lucy lost in dark thoughts while Ben tried to figure out how he should feel toward her. Ben studied her out of the corner of one eye, and then realized she'd been doing the same to him.

She grimaced. "What?"

He stepped out into the hall, and the door slid shut behind him. “Just ain’t seen you since our, uh, little encounter in the Recyclin’ Center.”

She tugged a few snarls out of her mess of black curls. “Yeah. Went on a rotation in Seattle. Bunkered down with a couple plumbers who’d run across a rotworm nest. Finally managed to flush the suckers out.”

“Whatcha back here for?”

“At the moment? You.”

His brows popped skyward. “Me? Look, Lucy, that pucker sucker-punch I laid on you? I know it kinda knocked you flat, but that was the point, and the only point, lemme tell you. ’Sides, technic’ly we weren’t swappin’ spit, since Carl—”

She whacked his arm hard enough he winced.

“Stow it. A bunch of us were in Supplies getting restocked when you put in your call. Monty ordered us onto volunteer duty and I pulled the short straw.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah. Ah. So don't think I won't leave you locked in the first broom closet we come to if you make this any more difficult than it has to be. Where do you need to go?”

He started walking and she moseyed after.

“Employee Records,” he said. “I had an appointment to dig into some of the archives.”

“A real appointment or one you’ve made up as an excuse to get a guide?”

“Real one, believe it or not.”

“I don’t believe it.”

He paused and laid a hand over his heart. “Aww, I’m hurt.”

Her finger thumped his chest. “Not yet.”

“Listen, Lu, can’tcha just get me there and see? I promise, cross my heart and stick a cherry in my eye, that if I don’t got a right and proper appointment, you can march me straight to the nearest broom closet.”

She studied him for a moment and then tilted her head down the hall.

“So what’re you looking for?” she asked as they resumed walking.

“I stashed some dirty mags in there before everythin’ went britches over bonkers for me and wanted to see about gettin’ ’em back.”

She latched onto his arm and dragged him toward a side hall.

“Closet it is then,” she said.

He managed to yank lose. “Sorry, Lu. I was just tryin’ to get a chuckle outta you. Used to be that weren’t so hard. But here’s the truth.” When he touched a breast pocket, the folded picture he’d slipped in there crinkled. “I’m lookin’ for anythin’ that might mebbe tell me what actually happened on my last job with Karen. Somethin’ that’d finally help me find out what them Scum did to her.”

She paused, and a look he couldn’t

identify flickered across her face. Pain? Anger? Did she think he chased a lost cause? Even Francis, with the authority he wielded, hadn't been able to provide Ben with much beyond what the public records already stated. He tried to meet her eyes, but she glanced aside.

“Lu? Somethin’ wrong?”

She plodded ahead, and he hurried to match her.

“Let’s just get this done before this coffee wears off and puts me in a really bad mood,” she said.

“Yes’m.”