


CHAPTER ONE

 ani 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. Circumlocation. 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