

Saints of the Apocalypse #1

PLAGUE SAINT

Rory North

For those who fight back.

For those who start fires.

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Chapter One

As Red as Roses

Everyone who said hell was fire and flames was wrong. Hell was the biting cold and dark skies that came with the season Winter Pierce was named for.

“You’re brooding,” River said as he walked by, mug of coffee in hand.

Winter didn’t stop trying to glare the icy street below the window out of existence. “Of course I am. It’s dark and it’s cold.”

River stopped, then backed up until he was at her side. “Can’t you sign up for afternoon shifts?”

Not anymore. But River couldn’t know about that. “Then it would be dark when I leave work instead.” Winter sighed. “This place really is hell.”

Her brother took another sip of his coffee, undoubtedly coming up with a polite way to tell her she was being ridiculous. “And what exactly do you think you’re being punished for?”

Two weeks ago, Winter wouldn’t have had an answer. But killing someone and impersonating them probably left some kind of mark on your soul. Even if the death was an accident. Even if it was to save your mother.

“Come on, Winter,” River pressed. “Snow’s just snow. Seasons are just seasons.”

“And Devil’s Pass is just a city built too far north for my taste.” Winter finally turned around, sick of staring at the dark street outside their apartment building. The hallway River had been headed for branched off to her left. The space in front of her was the family’s dining and living room. The wooden floors were always cold, the white walls could do with a fresh coat of paint, and the sparse furniture had been there for as long as Winter could remember.

River reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a golden locket. *The* golden locket. “Would it cheer you up if I let you win this back?”

Winter snorted. “Let me win? Yeah, right.” Her gaze flickered to the old grandfather clock on the other side of the dining table. “But we don’t have time for a card game.” Last time Dad had caught them playing cards before work, he’d warned them that he’d confiscate the deck for a month if they were late.

“Lucky draw, then?” River raised an eyebrow. “Come on. You have nothing to lose.”

“Fine.”

Winter followed River through the dining room into the kitchen, where Mom was packing up her own bag to go to work at the bank near City Hall. Her long hair, the same shade of dark brown as River’s, hung in a thick braid down her back.

River’s hair had almost grown long enough to be pulled back, too. Dad would probably tell him to go get a trim soon.

Mom slid on one of her gloves. “You two leaving now?” she asked as she reached for the other.

“In a minute.” River opened a drawer and pulled out the card deck. He shuffled the stack a few times, then fanned them out across the counter facedown and gestured for Winter to pick one. After she made her choice, he selected his own card.

Winter held up hers. “Six of roses.”

“Damn.” River revealed his. Two of suns.

Winter laughed and held out her hand. Despite losing, River grinned as he dropped the locket into her palm. “Enjoy it while it lasts,” he told her. “After dinner tonight, I’m beating you at devil’s bridge.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Winter slid the locket into her coat.

Still smiling, River asked, “You walking out with Mom and I?”

“I have to get my bag from my room,” Winter replied. “And if I leave now, I’ll be early, anyway.” She nodded to the cards spread out on the counter. “I can put those away.”

“That’s the winner’s job, anyway.”

Winter rolled her eyes. “Sure.”

“We’ll see you tonight, then,” Mom said as she finished buttoning her coat and picked up her bag. “Your father said he’s making casserole, so be back by six. Both of you.”

Winter nodded. “See you tonight.”

While Mom and River headed out, Winter gathered up the cards. The last one she picked up was her winning card, and she took a moment to run her thumb along the edge, to study the white roses printed on the front. It had been a couple of weeks since she and River had made time to play a real game. It would be nice to take her mind off of things for an hour or so.

She returned the cards to the drawer and walked to her room. Pausing in her doorway, she took the locket back out. Her thumb pressed the button on top and it popped open, revealing the photograph of Daisy—the Saint Bernard they’d lost to old age three years ago—with Winter and River on either side of her.

So sentimental this morning. Winter shook her head. Maybe she was getting sick. She crossed the room to her window and pushed it open. A blast of frigid wind greeted her, making her wince. Jaw clenched, hand shivering, she grabbed her black bag off the dark tiled roof below and yanked it inside.

Cold as it was, this rear roof was the best hiding place. Her family wouldn’t stumble across the bag accidentally, and the high

stone wall behind their building made it impossible to access or even see the roof from anywhere but Winter's window.

She slung the bag over her shoulder and returned to the kitchen. Dad was up now, reading the newspaper at the counter. He looked up as she entered. "Off to the station?"

Winter nodded and set her bag on the counter. As she pulled her long white-blond hair up into a ponytail—lighter than even Dad's blonde—she noticed his gaze linger on the black bag a little too long for comfort.

"Mom said you're making casserole tonight?" Winter asked, hoping to distract him.

It worked. His pale blue eyes flitted to her. "That's the plan. You'll be back by six?"

"I should be." Winter picked her bag back up. "See you tonight."

"See you tonight."

Winter pulled her hood over her head and stepped out into the darkness. It was already seven a.m., but there wasn't even a hint of sun on the horizon. Only dull streetlights and the glow from apartment windows offered a glimpse of the snowflakes drifting through the air.

She hurried down the icy metal stairs as fast as she dared, sparing a quick glance at the drawn curtains of the apartment below hers. Rumor had it the Fischers were getting sick, but she had yet to see them come into the hospital.

They probably couldn't afford it.

Winter waited for the trolley under the streetlight that flickered more and more each day. She kept a gloved hand wrapped around the knife in her pocket. She'd yet to hear of any trouble on this block, but enough mugging victims came into the hospital each week to keep her on her toes. Of course, that wasn't her department.

The trolley finally came rolling up the tracks, bell ringing and loose parts rattling, a little more of its yellow paint chipped off

than the day before. Winter nodded a greeting at the conductor as she climbed in and made her way to the back.

The new routine was becoming familiar: passing the city guard station where she used to organize files, getting off the trolley at a restaurant across the street from the hospital, changing into her stolen uniform in the bathroom, and sneaking out the window.

Winter paused outside the restaurant to stare across the street at the hospital. The building sat at the very edge of the city's north side, its back facing the forest beyond. Besides the restaurant, there were also a few shops and apartments on this street, but it was clear that this area bordered on wilderness. The dark forest loomed in the gaps between buildings. Some mornings, Winter could hear the cries of animals. Occasional howls that chilled her blood.

The snow began to fall faster. Still, she turned to gaze at the rest of Devil's Pass. The land sloped down from here, and from the right angle, she could see the trolley tracks snaking down the pass. Then there were the sections of stone wall around the city, the warm glow of streetlights scattered in the darkness, and even the gleaming bronze dome of City Hall.

Mountains loomed over it all, icy and jagged, towering in every direction. Apparently, they made most people feel protected. Winter just felt trapped.

Unable to stand the suffocating view any longer, she went inside.

The smell of coffee and cooking sausages followed Winter as she hurried past the front counter and into the bathroom before any employees could notice her. In one of the stalls, she shrugged off her coat and kicked off her boots. The black long-sleeved shirt and pants she wore underneath were too thin to keep out the cold, but they were perfect to wear with the Plague Saint's uniform.

The uniform was mostly black leather—the coat, the hat, the boots, the gloves. The exception was the beaked bronze mask that attached to an upper faceplate. It covered the front of Winter's

head and hid her eyes under dark lenses. It was apparently a simpler, sleeker version of something from the old world, according to the texts she'd found in the real Plague Saint's office. Something even older than the rare pieces of technology in the hospital labs.

She ran a finger along the curved metal beak. This mask had always struck her as unnecessary. The other doctors wore simple surgical masks and managed to avoid catching their patients' illnesses. Winter didn't know much about the man whose place she'd taken, but she suspected he had a flair for the dramatic. After all, he'd quickly embraced the title of Saint when people first began whispering it years ago.

Or maybe he'd simply hoped the strange outfit would distract from the fact that he was on the shorter side. It certainly worked to Winter's advantage. She was just tall enough to make the uniform fit.

This wasn't the only uniform. The Saint had several more in his office, all identical. And of course, there was the one still on his body, somewhere. Winter shuddered at the thought.

The uniform's coat buttoned up and its thin hood went underneath the hat. Winter put the mask on last, threw her bag over her shoulder, and pressed an ear to the stall door. The bathroom was usually empty this time of morning—even with the restaurant already serving breakfast—but she couldn't be too careful.

Nothing. She slipped out of the stall, made her way to the window, and climbed into the alley behind the building.

Winter had known when she started all this that she wouldn't be able to keep it up forever. She also had no idea what to do about it. She could simply stop showing up to the hospital and get a job somewhere else. Maybe even try going back to the guard station. But the sudden disappearance of the most important person in the city would surely launch an investigation.

And if she stopped, people would die. Well, more than were already dying. She couldn't save everyone.

It was so much brighter inside the hospital, and the light was only intensified by how white everything was: white floors, white walls, white ceilings. Winter squinted as she headed for her office, grateful for the fact that her face was hidden.

Her office. How long had she thought of the place as hers? She'd felt like a stranger in someone else's home, at first. Afraid to touch anything. Afraid one misplaced item would give her away as an imposter.

Light spilled out from under the office door. Phoebe was already here, then. Winter turned the handle and stepped inside.

The office was a welcome reprieve from the sterile white of the hallways behind her. The floors were dark wood, the wallpaper patterned gray and green, and the shelves lining the walls were packed with a variety of books. Chairs upholstered with red fabric sat on either side of a large desk. In fact, the door to the laboratory was the only significant patch of white in the space.

Phoebe was on her feet in an instant, moving so fast she nearly knocked over her chair. "Finally! You're late."

The Plague Saint was two minutes later than usual, and Phoebe was panicking. Not surprising. Winter eyed the papers in her assistant's hands. "I hope those are patient files and not doodles."

In her time working at the city guard station, she'd learned a valuable piece of information: guard helmets had built-in voice modifiers that made the guards sound more intimidating by deepening their voices. Swiping one had been no easy task, even before she'd quit, and fitting it into the plague mask was a challenge. But it had been worth it. Winter's voice was unrecognizable.

"Uh—" Phoebe shuffled through the pages, a hint of a flush showing on the warm, golden tones of her face. "Of course. Oh, the hospital director stopped by! He brought this week's payment." She nodded to the envelope on Winter's desk.

"Great." Winter moved toward the desk.

“That’s not all.” Phoebe tucked one of her dark shoulder-length curls behind her ear. “He asked for a follow-up on Andersen’s bill.”

“Jacob Andersen?” Winter picked up a piece of paper left under her payment. It was the bill in question. “He died.”

“Director says money’s still owed.” Phoebe shrugged. “Said to contact his family.”

“He didn’t have any immediate family.” Winter sighed. She’d have to deal with that later. The other stack of papers that had been left on the desk, her patient files for the morning, went into her bag. “I’m starting my rounds. The rest of yesterday’s evaluations still need to be sorted.”

“Will do, sir.”

Winter picked up her bag—which contained, among other things, the book that stood between her and failure—and the unusually heavy black staff that was topped with a pair of carved bronze wings. She hated the damn thing. The old Plague Saint had carried it around and made it clear he’d use it to keep people away from him without hesitation. So far, Winter hadn’t had to do more than carry it, but she worried someone might force her hand.

You’ve already killed someone, genius.

But that was an accident. Mostly. And regardless, there was a difference between the powerful man she’d killed and the desperate, dying people that filled the hospital.

The book, on the other hand, was the most valuable thing the Plague Saint had left behind. The Plague Bible, as he’d titled it, had all of the information Winter needed to help people. Help enough of them to avoid suspicion, at least.

In addition to notes on identifying plagues and checklists to run through for new patients, the Plague Bible was full of formulas for medications. Winter found all of the ingredients mentioned in the Saint’s lab, and the equipment involved was easy enough to figure out with his instructions.

But medicine was only part of the equation. The real doctor had years of experience to back him up. Sometimes

decisions had to be made, sometimes unusual symptoms popped up, and Winter could only make her best guess on how to respond based on old patient notes.

Winter entered her first patient's room. The woman had been checked in an hour before her arrival, and while other doctors had started treatment, she'd been asked to consult.

"Has she been diagnosed, yet?" Winter asked the nurse standing over the unconscious woman.

The nurse shook his head. "All we've done so far is get her hydrated." He held out a clipboard. "Here are Dr. Morrison's notes. He was thinking green or blue, because of the eye infection."

The plagues that had sprung up in the northern cities were just one of the many consequences of a damaged Earth. Devil's Pass was safe from heat waves and floods, but it was infested with diseases that lingered even centuries after its founding, said to have emerged from thawed glaciers. Nearly a dozen illnesses were considered common, and at some point, someone decided to slap the name 'plague' on the five worst ones, along with a random color to differentiate them.

Green plague was the easiest to treat. Blue would be a bit trickier. Winter dismissed the nurse with a nod of her head and moved to examine the woman, scanning Dr. Morrison's notes as she did. It would be tough to determine which of the two plagues the woman had by sight alone. She'd have to run a sample test, another procedure outlined in the Plague Bible.

The worst thing she'd learned from reading the Plague Bible wasn't the descriptions of awful symptoms that couldn't be treated, nor was it the countless documented cases that ended in death. It was the surprising amount of useful information that only the Saint had known. He'd detailed a dozen different tricks to identify diseases that were otherwise indistinguishable from each other. He had cures for many, and treatments for most others. And for the ones that he'd yet to find a way to fight, he had remedies for the symptoms to keep patients comfortable until they were

either lucky enough to recover or faced the more likely outcome: death.

And he'd kept it all to himself.

Other doctors thought the Plague Saint was a miracle worker, but he wasn't even a real doctor. He was a scientist who refused to share. Winter initially assumed it was so he could have all the glory, but knowing what she'd learned before killing him, she supposed he might have had even more sinister reasons. Power. Leverage. The entire city, government included, under his control.

She'd begun revealing his secrets to the other doctors, but she could only share so much at once. Dumping the entire Plague Bible's wealth of knowledge in a single day would raise questions she couldn't answer without revealing herself.

Winter took a sample of the sick woman's saliva to test and moved on to the next patient. Once she finished her first round of check-ins, she'd show a few of the other doctors the chemical test that would reveal whether the woman had green or blue plague.

Of course, what should have been an hour's work was interrupted by questions from other doctors, Phoebe popping up to ask for signatures on paperwork, and new patients coming in. But nearly four hours after arriving at the hospital, Winter was finally in the lab connected to her office, setting up the test.

Phoebe knocked on the open door frame. "May I enter, oh great Plague Saint?"

Winter sighed. "Sure."

Phoebe had started working as Winter's assistant two days after she'd replaced the real Saint, and at first, she'd thought it another bit of good luck that the Saint's request for an assistant had been filled so late. She interacted with Phoebe more than anyone else at the hospital, and replicating whatever interactions her and the Saint would have had prior to Winter taking his place would have been impossible.

The downside was that Phoebe was unfamiliar with how harsh the Saint had been to people around him, and Winter apparently wasn't enough of an asshole to scare Phoebe into avoiding sarcasm and the occasional quip. Phoebe was the only person in the hospital who didn't fear her to some degree.

Well, Phoebe, and the hospital director.

"There's a new patient you should see," Phoebe said, snapping Winter from her thoughts. "His coworkers said he was fine this morning but got really sick in just a few hours."

Winter frowned. "A few hours? Why didn't they bring him in as soon as he started showing symptoms?"

"His supervisor threatened to fire him if he left, until it was clear he was on the verge of dropping dead. And everyone who did help get him here is getting their pay slashed for the day."

Great. Not only had this poor guy's chances of survival gone down, but he'd probably spread whatever he had to his coworkers. Maybe Winter could persuade the director to let her bill the factory instead of the patient. She'd had the idea for a couple of weeks, and this was the perfect opportunity to try it.

"If he got sick that quickly, it's probably red plague," she said to Phoebe. Even red plague didn't typically come on quite that fast, but Winter had to assume the guy had been hiding his symptoms at first in hopes of getting a few more hours of work in. "What room?"

"Seven-oh-four," Phoebe answered.

The tower. That part of the hospital had the strictest quarantine protocols. Winter grabbed her bag. "I'll go get his treatment started. I should be back in about fifteen minutes. Could you get word to any available doctors that I'm going to run a demonstration?"

"Yessir." Phoebe did a mock salute as Winter passed her. "Say, you think maybe this guy could have the white plague?"

"That's not real."

“You sure about that, doc?” Phoebe asked. “Because I’m hearing more and more nurses say that some of the red plague deaths aren’t quite like the rest—”

“Everyone’s body reacts differently,” Winter interrupted, pausing in the doorway. “And it’s not your job to worry about it.”

There was no white plague. There couldn’t be. The Plague Saint had never mentioned anything like it in his notes.

Which meant if it was real, Winter would have nothing to fight it with.

She shook her head as she left the lab behind. Green, blue, violet, yellow, red. Those were the five major plagues, the same five that had been around since Devil’s Pass was little more than a mining settlement. Various mayors over the past century or so had built their campaigns on getting rid of the damn things once and for all, but none had succeeded. Some tried quarantines that the city failed to commit to well enough to do any good. Trade with nearby communities only complicated matters.

There had also been attempts to distribute masks to the general population, which helped, though there had never been enough money funneled into their production to make a real difference.

Other mayors had paid scientists exorbitantly to find permanent cures that would impart immunity on the population, but nothing stuck. Even current treatments occasionally had to be modified as the plagues evolved. Slowly, but surely, they were getting tougher to fight. And they were strangely persistent. Even the Saint had made notes in the Bible about their unusual nature, though he’d never made any real conclusions about why that was.

In addition to eye infections, green and blue plagues caused bruising all over the body. Violet plague was a more serious illness characterized mainly by frequent vomiting, while yellow affected the liver and produced extreme jaundice. And red plague, the worst of them all, caused patients to cough up blood.

Winter rode the elevator up to the seventh floor alone. It was such a creaky, rickety thing that she usually preferred the stairs, but red plague cases were time sensitive.

Five nurses were already in the room when she arrived, blocking the patient from view. Winter sighed. "Coming through. Give him some space, please."

"We started the stabilization process," one nurse said as she took a step back.

Winter's mouth opened to thank her, but the words caught in her throat. The rest of the nurses moved out of the way, leaving her to stare at the young man lying unconscious in the hospital bed.

Another nurse spoke up. "Here's the patient's file." He handed Winter a clipboard, and she took it, barely processing the action. "Need anything else from us?"

She didn't answer. Couldn't answer. All she could do was move her gaze back and forth between the familiar name on the file and her unconscious brother.

Chapter Two

In Sight and Mind

Three hours. River had started showing symptoms three hours before he was brought in.

Could he have infected Mom? Dad? Winter? And where did he catch it? Someone else at the factory? The Plague Saint had noted that red plague exposure could lead to symptoms in half a day or less in many patients; the five plagues all had unusually short incubation periods compared to other illnesses, which the Saint had repeatedly commented on as bizarre.

But what if Phoebe was right? What if this was something worse than red plague? Something that didn't have a standard treatment, let alone a cure?

"Plague Saint?" the closest nurse pressed, his tone laced with concern. "Is something wrong?"

Focus. Winter sucked in a deep breath. She couldn't save River if she was panicking. "You gave him a starter dose of Red-X?"

"Of course."

"He waited three hours to come in." Winter scanned the notes the nurses had made. "Let's put him on a level five schedule. Keep him hydrated. I'm going to bring him a new supplemental treatment I've been working on." The Saint had 'supplemental treatments' for all five plagues. And he'd had some of them for months, based on his notes. "Has his family been contacted?"

One of the other nurses shook her head. "Not yet."

“Well, get on it.” Dad had nowhere else to be today, and company would be good for River. They’d make him wear a mask and stay ten feet away, but it was better than nothing. Winter handed the clipboard back to one of the nurses. “I’ll be back soon.”

Her gaze lingered on River for a moment before she forced her legs to take her out of the room. His light skin had paled to near white, and the sheen of sweat on his forehead indicated fever.

No need to panic yet. The Saint’s medicine still had a decent chance of helping him. It would do far more than Red-X alone, at least.

Red-X was one of the drugs developed by the hospital. Each plague had a corresponding drug, but the treatments the Saint had created were more effective. In the two weeks since Winter had taken over and begun using the Saint’s treatments more... *liberally* than he had, the red plague survival rate had gone up from nine percent to fifty-two percent. Winter claimed a recent breakthrough, but the treatment had existed for nearly a month prior. And the Saint’s notes even stated that he’d used it on some patients.

But why not all of them?

Fifty-two percent. But there were a dozen factors she had to take into account. River was only twenty-one and had a healthy immune system, but he’d waited so long to come in. *Idiot*. How many of his coworkers had he spread it to? His supervisor had better pray Winter didn’t retaliate. Was there someone she could file a complaint to? Would they care?

Not now. Winter needed to focus on getting him stable. Retaliation—or, God forbid, revenge for her brother’s life—would have to wait.

Winter threw open the door to the Saint’s office and froze. Again. As if this day couldn’t get any worse.

The tall, thin man standing in the center of the office turned to face Winter as she entered. The gray in his hair and

wrinkles in his pale skin put him in his late fifties. The dark blue suit he wore suggested he was important.

“Plague Saint,” Director Adams greeted her without a hint of warmth. “We need to discuss a few matters.”

“Now’s not a good time.” Winter fought to keep her voice cool. “I have a red plague patient I need to get treatment to.”

“That’s part of why I’m here, actually.” Adams sank into the chair opposite Winter’s desk, the same chair Phoebe usually sat in. Winter frowned, wondering where Phoebe was.

Apparently guessing her question, Adams said, “I told your assistant to take a lunch break. We’ll have some time to ourselves.” He nodded toward the door.

Winter pulled it shut behind her and crossed the room to her desk.

“As I’m sure you know, I’ve been incredibly busy the past couple of weeks,” Adams said as she sat down. “Mayor Atherton’s been dealing with complaints about the city budget, particularly in relation to the hospital.” He leaned forward and clasped his hands together. “Of course, it’s not your job to worry about that. It’s your job to heal the sick, isn’t it, Plague Saint?”

Winter’s heart hammered against its cage. Was he accusing her of something?

“So, you understand why I haven’t been around much,” Adams continued after a moment. “And why I’ve only been able to communicate with you through letters. Which can easily fall into the wrong hands.”

Winter needed to say something. Anything. “Of course.”

“That being said, I do find it interesting that survival rates have increased so...*dramatically* over the past couple of weeks.”

Winter’s hands tightened into fists in her lap. This is what she’d been afraid of. There was a status quo, and no matter how many entries she read in the Saint’s journals, there were things she couldn’t replicate: relationships, habits, and all the little details of whatever agreement he had with the hospital director.

“I’ve made some rapid progress in my treatments,” she said, internally wincing at how flimsy the statement sounded.

Adams leaned forward. “I understand that being mysterious and aloof is your thing, but don’t forget that I’m the one paying you. I also understand that I haven’t been able to communicate my desires for our patients. But I’m back now.” His voice lowered. “And I am very close friends with the owner of the factory River Pierce works at. This whole incident is a lawsuit waiting to happen, if he survives. Or worse, protests. Louder and harder to fight.”

Winter’s jaw clenched. The fact that Adams was laying this out so plainly to her only made it clearer what kind of man the Plague Saint had been.

Adams rose to his feet. “Medicine is expensive,” he continued. “I think we should keep Pierce on Red-X for now. That should do just fine, don’t you think?”

A Red-X-only treatment schedule would likely kill River. Winter stood up, mirroring Adams. “I agree.”

So much for Winter’s plan of billing the factory and saving her family from even more debt. She watched the back of Adam’s head as he approached the door. Her best option was to sneak the better treatment to River, right? Blame his recovery on pure luck? Pray Adams didn’t question her further?

Adam paused. “Oh, and if I don’t receive an update on Andersen’s payment by the end of the day, I’m sending the bill to the city guard. If you have time, maybe track down his next of kin and give them a warning. But no need to concern yourself with it if you’re busy.”

Winter swallowed and nodded. She knew from her time working in the guard office exactly what would happen: the city guard would track down whatever poor soul was Andersen’s closest living relative, and if they couldn’t pay the bill—or afford a sufficient payment plan—they’d be thrown in jail. Or at the very least, lose their home.

Winter couldn't let that happen. But she was on thin ice as it was. Apparently, the Plague Saint had been picking and choosing who to save based on Adams' requests.

Monsters. Both of them. And the factory owner, as well. Winter paced back and forth across the office. With Adams back, she'd probably have to stop sharing new information with the other doctors, too.

Well, Winter had already killed one man...

By accident, she reminded herself. She dismissed the idea as soon as it entered her mind. It was ridiculous. She couldn't just kill the hospital director.

The door opened, and Winter braced herself for the director to reappear with even worse news, but it wasn't him. It was Phoebe. Phoebe, with tears streaming down her face and a folded piece of paper in one of her clenched fists.

Oh, boy. What was Winter supposed to say here? "Is something wrong?" she asked, heart pounding. Did she sound concerned enough? Or did she sound too concerned, for someone as supposedly mysterious and aloof as the Plague Saint?

Phoebe sniffed. "Director came by earlier. Said the hospital's budget is being slashed, and he has to cut my pay in half."

That was rather absurd, considering the recent pay raises noted in the Saint's records. Adams hadn't said anything to Winter about cutting her pay. "I'm sorry," she said lamely.

"I'm not going to be able to pay my tuition!"

"Tuition?" Winter's brow furrowed. "What tuition?"

"I'm taking night classes at St. Minerva's College." Phoebe sniffed again and wiped an arm across her face. "Nursing classes. I applied for this assistant job to get my foot in the door, you know? But now it might not even matter."

Winter had a dozen other problems to deal with. But seeing Phoebe like this was oddly disheartening, even if Winter usually found her upbeat attitude a little overwhelming. "I'll talk to

the director,” Winter told her. “I’m sure there’s money somewhere.”

Phoebe looked up. “Really? You think he’d change his mind?”

“I think I can convince him.” *Definitely not.* But Winter was being paid three times the amount she’d made at the guard station, and she’d simply been stashing it away in case of emergency. What she had now was far from covering River’s hospital bills, anyway, so sparing a little for Phoebe wouldn’t make much of a difference. “How much more do you need?”

“Two hundred pieces a week.”

Okay. That was doable. Winter nodded. “I’ll talk to him later today.” She paused, a question crossing her mind. She really didn’t need the answer, but she was curious. “I thought you were only seventeen.”

“The college lets you start classes as young as sixteen, if you pass a bunch of tests,” Phoebe explained.

“Oh.” It had been a little weird, taking Phoebe on as an assistant when Winter was secretly the same age as her. Winter moved toward the lab door. “Well, I’ll let you know what Adams says later. But I have a few things to take care of first.”

She entered the lab and began poking around. She swore she had some red plague treatment left over from the last time she’d made it but couldn’t remember where she’d put it. It wasn’t much, but it would at least give River a boost while she made more.

She tried a few cabinets. Most were kept empty, but sometimes she threw random bottles and tools in them to deal with later. This row, however, was proving fruitless. She reached the corner of the room and pulled open the last door.

The final cabinet was occupied by a few cobwebs and a dusty brown book leaning against the back wall. Frowning, Winter reached for it. She must not have opened this door before, because she didn’t recognize the book.

She grabbed the book and realized it was stuck in place. What the hell? Was it nailed to the cabinet? She pulled harder. The book tipped forward half an inch, and something clicked.

The wall to Winter's right groaned. A vertical gap appeared, and then a section of the wall swung open. A hidden door.

Seriously? That had been there the entire time? Winter stepped back from the cabinet. She'd been here two weeks and failed to find the Plague Saint's secret...dungeon?

She darted to the lab door, checked that it was locked, then returned to the newly opened gap in the wall. A set of stairs took her down a level and into a long, narrow hallway that took nearly ten minutes to traverse. Just as she was considering turning back, she took a sharp corner and found herself facing a heavy iron door.

It was unlocked. Winter eased it open and stepped into—
A lab. Another lab. What did the Plague Saint need a second lab for?

A *secret* second lab, Winter reminded herself as she entered the space. Did anyone else know about this? Despite the Saint's agreement with Director Adams, maybe there were things he'd been keeping from his boss.

A quick sweep of the room revealed several things of note. The most interesting find was a black notebook similar to the Plague Bible, which at a glance appeared to have completely different entries and notes. There were also more than a dozen vials and bottles that were seemingly older versions of treatments for the plagues. Beyond that, the drawers and cabinets mostly held mundane stationery, such as the black pens with gold bands near the tips that matched the pens scattered throughout the Saint's office.

The strangest thing, though, was the empty cages.

Winter poked around the cages. Whatever they'd held must have been small. But besides those, the lab had most of the same equipment as the one upstairs. Some of it was basic stuff that

Winter knew how to use: microscopes and pipettes and centrifuges and the like. There was even a camera and some film. Everything else was more advanced machinery that the Saint had been using in his research, but nothing Winter needed to mix serums and make medicine.

Winter tucked the notebook under her arm and, after one last sweep of the room, headed back to the hospital lab. She wanted to conduct a more thorough investigation of the space, but that would have to wait until she knew no one would come looking for her. And a look through the notebook might give her a better idea of what the Saint had been doing down here.

The notebook's introductory pages explained how the secret laboratory had come to exist. The hospital had originally been built with plenty of underground rooms and access to tunnels under the city, primarily for carrying out bodies during the height of the worst plague waves. The entrance passage between this lab and the hospital had been blocked off during a phase of reconstruction, and the Plague Saint had uncovered it during a round of more recent renovations. He'd had the hidden door and switch installed by bribing a few of the workers. And, according to his notes, Director Adams had no idea it existed.

Unfortunately, a few pages in, the Saint had switched to writing his entries in code. Winter spent five minutes trying to decipher the jumble of letters before tossing the book onto a table in frustration. She didn't have time for this during a busy shift.

But even as she went back to her usual work and turned her focus to saving River, she couldn't help mulling over the notebook in the back of her mind. The secret lab. The empty cages.

What the hell had the Plague Saint been working on?