

Storyboard-40

“You?” Grant asked with enough confusion in his voice Paul looked away from the koala. The kangaroo looked as confused as he sounded. “What are you doing here?”

“Why, running the show.”

Grant’s snort seemed to surprise even him. “You’re in charge? Bullshit. You’re nothing more than some two-bit amateur crafter with maybe delusions of being better than he was.”

“Who happened to have fostered the Staff Breaker.” The koala smiled proudly. “You’d be surprised what the right spin did for my position within the order.”

“So you bullshitted your way to the top, just like you did everything else in your life?”

“I seem to have done a decent job raising you,” the koala said, mildly offended.

“Until I found out what you had raised me to be, and I ran. That wasn’t part of what you were expected to do was it?”

“You ever considered I wanted you to find out, so you’d run? So you’d escape your fate?”

“I did,” Grant admitted, then motioned around them. “This pretty much puts the lie to that, doesn’t it?”

The koala shrugged. “Well, sacrifices have to be made if you want to improve the world.”

“Nothing’s going to improve with a guy like you running things. And it’s not happening, anyway. I am not doing my part and breaking this.”

“Oh,” the koala said, surprised. “Do you think you’re needed for this?” he smirked. “You always thought too much of yourself, my boy. Come on, we didn’t start this when you broke your staff. This has been—”

“Centuries in the making, I know. I happened to meet someone who was there for that screw-up, so you’ll understand if I don’t plan on sitting around while you try to blow up the planet, a second time.”

“Not going to happen. This time we’re going to do it right, and whatever does get damaged, well, I’ll rebuild, I mean, what better way to establish my new role than remaking the world?”

“Oh yeah. I know you, so I’m definitely not going to let that happen.”

Squeaky wheels sounded and a second later, a cart rolled out from another area where nothing was blocking it from view. It was large and as old as the device on it. At least Paul thought it was, based on the blockiness and size, but there was work added to it, electronics and metal plates and a book. Whatever it had been, they’d turned it into a talisman.

“Fuck,” Niel said. “Please tell me that isn’t what I think it is.”

“The genuine article,” the koala said. “Salvaged from the Manhattan project itself for this very purpose. See boyo, you were a happy accident I was hoping to take advantage of. A way to increase the effect.” He pointed to the device. “That was the planned way to blow this place.”

“Niel?” Thomas asked.

“That is a nuclear bomb,” the raccoon replied.

“Aren’t those things in teardrop-shaped containers with fins on top and the radiation symbols on all sides?”

“You’ve been watching too many movies, kid,” the koala said dismissively.

“I’m not going to let you do this,” Grant said.

“You really think you’re here to stop this, Son?”

“I think no one cares what you think I’m here for. We are going to stop this, and there’s nothing you can do to stop us.” Grant pointed Excalibur at the Koala. “You’re a would-be tyrant and nothing more, Walter. Someone who spent his life stealing what others achieved in an attempt to make people think you were better than you are. Men like you shouldn’t be allowed to stand. I will not let you stand.”

Hadn’t Excalibur been on the floor? Paul thought.

The koala laughed. “You and three kids?”

“Hey,” he, Thomas, and Niel exclaimed at the same time. It had been years since they’d been kids.

“I think we can handle you and that helper.”

The koala raised an eyebrow. “Why do you think it’s only the two of us?”

Six Chamber stepped out from behind spaces where there was nothing that should hide them.

“Really getting tired of that trick,” Thomas muttered, echoing Paul’s thought.

Each one had a staff, and one woman held a sword.

“That’s Joan’s sword,” Niel said.

“At least she doesn’t have an army to lead with it,” Thomas replied, “this time.”

“Remember,” the koala said. “Grant’s death had to coincide with the detonation if we want a chance to add his strength to the ceremony. Your job is to subdue him. The kids aren’t important.”

The woman with the sword went for Grant, and before Paul could move in that direction, a man was before him, swinging a staff at his head. Paul dodged, surprised that it looked like what he’d seen staff look like in movies, instead of some strange arrangement of items that could be, at times, confused for worthless junk.

He punched and missed when the man pushed himself out of the way, and in the air, with the end of the staff. Paul stared for a second as the man came down as if he was lowered by wires.

Niel had forced him to watch enough old martial art movies over the years he could recognize wire work fighting. Except there were no wires here. Then the man was flying at him, staff leading the charge in what had to be the most movie fake attack Paul had ever seen.

The impact sent him flying across the room, and he was pretty sure that without the added protection to his body armor, it would have gone through him. He got to his feet, ignoring the pain. Grant was in a sword fight with the woman. Niel was kicking the ass of a man who was now staffless. Thomas blinked around the room, administering blows and...

The Koala was next to the atomic bomb.

Fuck, were they planning on detonating the thing now? With them in the room?

“Thomas! We need to get that bomb out of here!”

The rat glanced in that direction, then vanished, and reappeared three feet from the koala, dropping to his knees and holding his head in his hands. The embroidery on the man’s shirt shimmered, and he smirked.

Then Paul had to deal with his deadly fake martial artist.

The man had no right to be as effective as he was. Paul couldn’t get a sense of any fighting styles to his motion, and only his quick reflex let him avoid most blows, which passed him with actual movie sound effects. When Paul did manage to land a blow, they had the intended effect. He just couldn’t land that many of them.

“Get Gilbert!” Grant yelled.

Paul caught sight of the rat appearing in the doorway, then was gone. The distraction was enough for Movie Staff to land a blow, and Paul glared at him as he got back to his feet. He was really getting fed up with the guy. The man’s eyes grew wider; as if he’d expected the golden tiger to be down for the count.

Paul stalked toward him, and the man readied himself.

Paul didn’t bother dodging, settling on deflecting the attack in exchange for getting closer with each step and forcing the man back until he was against the wall. With a grin, Paul punched, but the man rolled away and he struck the wall, between a lantern and a stone tablet with what could be hieroglyph carved on it.

“How about we avoid breaking anything!” Grant yelled. “There’s no telling if anything else might set to who damned thing off!”

A gun. Paul wanted a gun to end this. Without one, he ran at his opponent again, snarling. He saw the swing coming, knew it was going to hurt, and didn’t care. He was going to fucking end this right not no matter what it cost him.

The staff hit him in the side, and Paul had his arm closed over it before it send him flying again, and then a combination of Paul’s light feet and the staff’s magic kept them both standing. The man’s relief was short-lived as Paul’s fist impacted his face.

He let the staff fall, grabbed the staggering man by the shirt, looked over the room, and— “Neil, Duck!” He threw the man at the raccoon’s opponent as he lifted some device over his head Paul had no time to desire to figure out. Then a sword clattered to the ground, and Paul turned in time to see Grant kick the woman down. She didn’t get up.

“You think it’s going to be enough?” the koala said, still fiddling with the talisman. “You can’t get to me, and once I’m done with this, I’m—” he stepped away as the atomic bomb shook.

Thomas was in the middle of the room, looking like the armadillos were supporting his weight. Lawrence was deep in concentration, while Gilbert had the look of glee Paul

expected of a kid on Christmas morning with all the presents under the tree having his name on them.

Or if the world's biggest lover of things that went ka-boom was looking at the mother of all potential explosions.

The bomb slid away from the koala until it was next to Lawrence, and now it looked like the rat and armadillo were supporting each other, while Gilbert interposed himself between the bomb and koala, a ball of plasma forming in his hand.

Grant walked by them on his way to the koala. "You were the worse parent a guy could ever want." He punched the man as he opened his mouth to reply, and he dropped.

Paul let out a breath that caught. "Guys! We might not be out of the woods yet." Gilbert was lovingly running a hand over the atomic bomb.

"You know they expect you to disarm it, right Gil?" Lawrence said.

"But it's beautiful just as it is." The armadillo replied.

"Can you take it away, Thomas?" Grant asked.

"Not as drained as I am. This last just was blind. I'm surprised I'm conscious. I'd ask for a fuck, but" he motioned around them. "I'd really rather all this be dealt with first."

"This is basically every staff in existence, right?" Niel asked.

"Doubtful," Grant replied, "but it would be most of them."

"Then it's just a question of taking them out of this... arrangement and storing them someplace safe, isn't it? You can take it apart without blowing us up, right?"

"I don't know," Grant replied, pulling the complaining armadillo away from the bomb. "I'm not aware of anyone ever trying to undo a staff. and even if I can, that's just asking for one of the Chamber to go looking for them. Right now, I just wish there was a way to just wide them from existence so the Chamber wouldn't ever have..."

"Great," Thomas muttered, "he's getting an idea when I can't just teleport away."

"His ideas are usually good," Niel said.

"You haven't been traveling with him for the last couple of years," the rat replied.

"Okay, I think I can do this," Grant said after giving the room a slow once over.

"Do what, exactly?" Thomas asked.

"De—" he looked at them. "Deactivate the blow-up-the-world aspect of this thing. I'm going to need wood, a lot of it. Doesn't matter the shape. A hammer, some nails, no, make that a lot of nails. I'd really prefer having a full woodworking studio for what I have to make, but I can make it with that."

"There are tools back at the camp," Lawrence said. "Me and Gil can go get you those."

"There's probably something here too," Niel said. "This was their base of operation, after all."

"Good, good," Grant said, back to studying the room. "I'll take everything you can find me."

Paul stepped to Thomas while one armadillo dragged the other away. "How about you and me go looking for wood for Grant?"

The rat snorted. "I'm not in a state to move around a place this size looking for

wood.”

Paul smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m sure there is a bed somewhere in this place where you can get some wood.” He knew how tired his best friend was, by how long it took him to put it together. Then, he helped him walk until they found said bed.