

Storyboard-41

Paul walked out of the bedroom with Thomas to loud voices and orders and arguing. They exchanged a look and hurried down the stairs.

A lot had happened in the thirty minutes Paul had spent recharging his best friend. People from different families were mobilizing. Some were carrying wooden furniture downstairs. He saw someone with green in their fur. Then he felt Thomas's hand on his arm and they were in the middle of the mass of people, next to Denton.

"We made it through the Chamber's defense," the cheetah answered Paul's unasked question. "But they turned it around and forced us back in here. I caught a few thoughts about how those here would be able to deal with us, but now that it hasn't happened, they are up to something."

"It's an empty gesture," a jackal said dismissively. "There's nothing they can do anymore"

"They follow a god of creativity," the Green Man representative said. "You should never underestimate someone like that."

"Thomas," Denton said, "unless you're still busy with something, I could really use someone to do recon. Our precogs are being incapacitated by something, and the few with remote senses can't coordinate and give us a solid picture."

"I'll get on that, but first. Tell me you have someone watching Gilbert." At the frown, he added. "The Chamber's plan A was to use a nuke to activate their god killing plan. Gilbert is our best bet to make sure it doesn't go off, but only he doesn't make it happen himself, just to see what that explosion looks like. He has a thing for things that go boom." He paused. "Or, and I think that's worse, he might just leave with it and add it to his collection. I'm not sure what the US will do to someone entering the country with an atomic bomb. Anyway, I'll be back with news."

The rat was gone.

There was a mix of awe and cursing in the wake.

"I guess I can go look for Gilbert," Paul volunteered.

"Actually, I've been picking up from people that Grant as a plan," Denton said. "Can you check in with him and see if there are any chances he can be done before we have to risk this attack? I'm with representative Mulberry, I'd rather not risk finding out the Chamber has managed to cobble together something that can wipe us all out. You're probably the one he's more responsive to right now," he added as Paul was about to point out there had to be people Grant would respond to better. The only one he could think of was Thomas. The kangaroo and Niel had a history, but it wasn't recent.

He nodded and headed downstairs.

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Well, Grant had certainly made something.

Paul had no idea what it should be, other than in a museum of modern art, but it was certainly something. How the kangaroo had put this together in half an hour, Paul attributed to magic.

Grant did keep insisting woodworking was his specialty.

Paul stepped around the wooden tendril going from the central... altar? No that wasn't the right word for it. As he stepped around and a better image formed of what Grant had made there was a sense of familiarity to it that nagged at Paul.

The tendrils extended to the walls and reaching for certain of the staves there. That bone feather caught his attention again, but he pulled it away.

The kangaroo was working on the central There had to be a name for what this looked like. He was adding wood he ripped from furniture in a layered effect.

"Grant?" Paul called. "Any idea how much longer? We have a lot of Chamber mounting a last-ditch offensive and no idea what they're capable of."

"Shouldn't be long anymore." The kangaroo stood and rubbed his back. "I'm too fucking old for this." He looked around, then told the people moving wooden furniture in the room. "Okay, I have enough wood to finish this. You go back up and help keep this mansion from being overrun, tell anyone bringing me more to just drop it and join the defense. Paul, stay here, I'm going to need someone just in case someone gets through the defenses."

The golden tiger watched the men leave. Muscular and well-trained men. Then looked at Grant, who was back working on that... Damn it, why couldn't he work out what it was?

"I'm no mind reader, Grant, but really? You want me to defend you? That's kind of weak."

"Don't sell yourself short, Paul. You've stood through stuff that would break a lot of them." He paused. "That did break some of them." He went back to work. "But you're not wrong either. I have an ulterior motive." He paused again. "I'd rather not be alone right now, and those strangers, well..." he smiled. "You're better company."

"Sure, I'll go with that."

"Don't lose that," Grant said as he wedged wood here, then there. Carefully nailed a piece just so.

"Lose what?"

"Humility?" The kangaroo said, retrieving pieces of what might have been an armoire. "We magic bunch have a bad habit of being too full of ourselves. We can do all this stuff and we start thinking there's nothing we can't do. We forget that we're still just people sometimes. That eventually, it comes to an end and then we realize we missed a lot of small opportunities. The kind of things I expect normal people enjoy without even thinking about it."

The silence stretched as Paul watched Grant extend a tendril to something that looked like a shield made of shattered glass.

"Having coffee with friends," the kangaroo picked up, then sounded sad. "Making friends. We get too busy with our magic, too invested in it. We start thinking that it's the

only thing that really matters. We forget it's just a tool. It's no more important than a hammer. We...I forgot that."

He smiled at Paul. "So don't lose that. You have the privilege of coming into magic late. Of knowing what it was like to be normal, and how good that can be. Don't let all this power you now have access make you forget that."

"Thomas learned about it late," Paul pointed out, as Grant went back to work on the central piece, the important one, Paul was sure of it. It was what would ignite whatever this talisman did.

"He forgot," The kangaroo said flatly. "I mean, it's understandable. His power's unique in the most unique way it can be. It's not just a variation on what others do. He does the impossible. He teleports. That's brought him fame and wealth. It's easy to forget your roots then, and not realize you did. Maybe you can try to remind him of that, once things are quiet again. Remind him he can breathe, he can walk. He can enjoy a coffee with his friends." Grant sighed. "I—"

"There you are," Thomas said from the doorway, then was next to Paul. He looked around and whistle.

"Your timing's impeccable," Grant said with a chuckle. "Thirty seconds earlier and you might have been ripping me a new one."

"What did I miss?" the rat asked, looking from Grant to Paul.

"Grant's bemoaning missing out on normality," Paul answered, as the kangaroo picked up a sword off the ground, then laid it on top of central... he almost had it.

Thomas snorted, "Normal's overrated."

Grant took Excalibur and placed it at the end of Joan of Arc's sword, tip to tip in a highly ceremonial way.

"A pyre," Paul whispered. "It's a pyre."

Grant smiled. "I figured you'd see it."

"I don't," Thomas said.

"Grant, what exactly are you doing?" Paul asked. He saw the indecision in the kangaroo's eyes. The way he glanced at the entrance, Paul tried to decide how hard he'd argue against whatever lie Grant would say to get them to leave him alone.

The kangaroo's shoulders slumped with a heavy sigh. "I'm ending it."

"That's good," Thomas said, "so why do you look like it involves you throwing yourself off a cliff?"

"We forgot what it's like to be ordinary, Thomas. We became so wrapped up in our staves and what they let us do that it's all we've been. It was either those who had staves or those who wanted them. We're barely people anymore."

"You went around saving people, Grant," Thomas said. "That's a pretty people thing to do."

The kangaroo shook his head. "I went around preventing the Chamber from getting their hands on more staves. Even you, Thomas, I didn't set out to save Thomas Hertz. When we met, I was looking for a blossoming Practitioner, but my talisman wasn't precise enough."

“But you kept helping me,” uncertainly was creeping into the rat’s voice.

“I’m not heartless, Thomas. I just have blinders on. Had them on most of my life. And that was because of my staff. What I thought it should do. What it did instead, how I expected to make up for it.” He looked at his hands. “Who I actually was.”

“Grant?” Paul asked, not liking where this was going.

“So I’m redoing the parameters on this place.” He motioned around them. “It was meant to destroy gods, and I can’t really change the intensity. It’s baked into the staff they made.” He patted the top of the pyre. “But this little thing is going to redirect that intensity to something that will bring out a better result.”

“Grant,” Paul said again, adding a warning to his tone.

“I’m ending the Practitioners, Paul. I’m destroying every staff in existence. With this, it won’t matter where they are, or how well protected they are. The simple fact they exist will pull the magic to them and they will simply cease to be. That was the hardest part. Making them end, and not blow up. I’d hate got my last act to bring about more death.”

“Grant?” Thomas asked, worried. “What are you talking about?”

The kangaroo looked at Paul. “Have you worked out that part?”

The golden tiger shook his head.

“I’m not surprised. I didn’t either, even after you basically told me. After God Wolf kept telling me. Even Wassa understood, but I was too blind.” He looked at the rat. “I’m not Grant Summer, Thomas. I’m his staff.”

Thomas had trouble getting words out. He motioned to the kangaroo. “But, you’re there.”

Grant nodded. “I don’t know if I’m Grant, who absorbed the staff, or if when I broke it, I destroyed myself and it remade itself around me. But I’m the staff of storms.” He paused and a small smile formed. “I’m the staff of hope in the middle of the storm.” The sigh shook and Grant looked more at piece than Paul had ever seen him.

“No!” Thomas yelled.

“There’s no arguing with reality, Thomas,” The kangaroo said. “It’s the only thing that makes what I can do make sense.”

“I’m not fucking arguing about that part, asshole.” Thomas was before Grant, shoving him away from the pyre. “I’m not letting yourself commit suicide!”

“It isn’t suicide, it’s a sacrifice. One I have to pay to ensure the Chamber doesn’t start something like this again.”

“Find another way!” another shove. Thoms blinked and was in front of Grant, shoving again. “I am not losing you.” Shove. “You’re going to be there when I give birth.” Shove “You’re going to be godfather to my son!”

“I think there’s already a god with that claim on the position.” Grant caught Thomas in a hug. “I wish I could be there, Thomas. I would love to meet your son. But I’m not going to risk the chaos we Practitioner can bring on the world for that chance. I’m sorry. I’m just not that heartless.”

“You’re a fucking bastard, that’s what you are,” Thomas said in the kangaroo’s chest.

“I can live with that.”

“You won’t,” Thomas replied. “You’re going to die.”

“I already died. This is just me bringing an end to something that shouldn’t have been possible.”

“No wonder you’re my best friend too, then. We’re both impossible.” Thomas pushed away from Grant and wiped his eyes.

“What kind of physical damage are we looking at here?” Paul asked as Grant took his position by the pyre. “They’re a lot of people in and around the mansion.”

“There shouldn’t be any physical damage.”

“Shouldn’t be isn’t what someone wants to hear when dealing with the kind of power that could have destroyed gods, Grant.”

The kangaroo gave him a crooked smile. “Don’t ask a carpenter for precision when he didn’t even have an hour to make this. But like I said. I built it so the staves don’t explode. It should be true for this one too. There might be a disruption in the magic of the universe, but that won’t last. And it might just affect the talismans.”

Thomas took position next to Paul. “Are you absolutely certain there isn’t another way to do this?”

“Not one that ensures your son has a future without this kind of threat hanging over his head.”

“You’re still an asshole. How long can you give me to get everyone out?”

“Five minutes? I mean I’m the Staff Breaker. It’s not going to happen until I do it, but I don’t want to give the Chamber time to figure out what I’m up to.”

“Five minutes.”

Then Paul was in the middle of the sex tent, well away from the mansion. Thomas vanished before Paul could ask what the rat thought he was doing.

Over the next five minutes groups appeared, but each time, the rat was gone before Paul could get to him. Thomas was going to kill himself with those long-range jumps. The tent might not drain him, since he had been using it a lot, but he didn’t have a landing spot at the mansion.

He tried to get the cheetah’s attention so he could relay the message. Denton didn’t seem to be affected by those kinds of teleports, but he too didn’t stick around.

Then Thomas appeared with a group of three and collapsed to the floor.

Paul ran for him.

The disruption in magic Grant predicted stopped Paul in his track as it hit him. For a moment, everything was simply wrong. Then it was back to what was now normal for him, and he thought he’d get to make sure Thomas was okay.

Grant was wrong about what he did not affecting the physical world. The flash of light blinded Paul and everyone, even through the tent’s fabric.

Then the shockwave slammed into him and the light turned into darkness.