

# Storyboard-39

The silence turned into a high pitch whine as Paul's sight came into focus. He made out the kangaroo, his mouth moving, as he looked around, but Paul couldn't make out the words. The focus sharpened some more, as the whine lowered, and he could make out the consternation on Grant's face.

Paul couldn't make out anyone around them, and he realized it wasn't because there was something wrong with his eyes. There was no one anywhere around them.

His focus sharpened, and he made out fallen trees further away, and bodies among them. A lot of bodies.

Grant grabbed his arm and pulled him along. The words didn't quite register, but the tone and expression on Grant's face carried urgency.

Paul's thinking also sharpened.

They were close to the mansion where the Chamber would perform their ceremony, and they had to have heard that thunder either hurry it along or send more people to stop them.

"I just don't get it," Grant muttered.

"Get what?" Paul asked, disengaging his arm from the kangaroo's hold and running at his side.

"How this happened." Grant motioned ahead of them, at more bodies lying on the ground before them. "I don't have a staff. Excalibur can't do that."

"I hope you aren't looking at me for answers. I'm way too new at being magic to even hazard a guess." Ahead, the entrance to the mansion was visible, without anyone guarding it. "Grant?"

The kangaroo slowed. "Yeah, I noticed the lack of people."

A rat and raccoon appeared between them and the mansion.

"Sorry we're late," Thomas said, panting. "Getting here wasn't a straight line, even for me."

"Where's everyone?" Paul asked.

"Why are you here?" Grant asked.

"I'm not letting you finish this alone," Thomas replied, sounding offended. "I was kind of there when this mess started."

"This started long before we met, Thomas." Grant looked at Niel. "You definitely don't have to be involved."

"Come on, Grant. You're about to stop the Chamber from killing gods. What kind of historian would I be if I didn't do everything I can to be here?"

"A living one? You all seem to act like I'm going to win. Do you have any idea how many people have to be in there? Don't you get it that this is basically hopeless?"

"Bleakest," Paul said and earned himself stares, "is when you're the brightest, Grant."

That's what Wassa said. It's what she told me to tell you. She was right about the storm. Maybe she's right about this, too."

"That doesn't mean I'm going to win."

"But we aren't going to win standing here," Niel said. "And I'd like us to be done before Jarod gets here. You know he's going to try to get a front-row seat to this too."

Grant looked at them, shook his head, muttered "kids" and started walking toward the entrance.

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The mansion was empty. At least the way Thomas led them to the stairs leading to the basement was devoid of people, and there was a heavy silence in the building that screamed lack of life.

Paul couldn't believe the Chamber had emptied the mansion to protect the perimeter. It made no sense to leave what had to be something they considered priceless unguarded.

"It's just ahead," Thomas said as they reached the bottom of the stairs and pointed to a doorway through which a golden tinted light came. "Prepare yourselves, because it's quite a sight."

Paul stopped them before entering so he could check for threats and Thomas rolled his eyes, vanishing. The golden tiger's complaint died on his lips as he entered the... cathedral was the only word that came to him.

It had to be the size of the entire mansion's basement and go up one floor. The light came from torches hanging at regular intervals on the wall, but Paul couldn't detect any smell of smoke.

The wavering light gave the walls a nearly ephemeral sense to them as shadows move between and over the staves hanging there.

"Oh possibilities," Grant said in a whispered breath. He was looking around, awed.

"Guys," Niel called. "Look at this, that's Inca designs. This is a roman gladius. Over there is an Egyptian oar." The raccoon kept on pointing to items hanging on the walls and talking about where they were from.

"All those things are staves?" Thomas asked.

"Where is everyone?" Paul asked, pulling his gaze from the dancing lights. "Niel, get back here."

"Come on, this is a once in a lifetime chance," the raccoon replied. "This looks to be Greek architecture right next to what looks to have been taken from a pagoda model. That right there is definitely Babylonian. How long have they been working on this?"

"A long time," Grant said in awe. He touched an intricately carved bone feather and jerked his hand away.

"You okay?" Paul asked as Thomas blinked next to Niel.

Grant's chuckle sounded incredulous. "There are things here I only heard of in stories." He rubbed his hands against his pants. "Things that were supposed to only be legends."

"You mean like Excalibur?"

The kangaroo shook his head. "We knew that was real. We just thought it had been

destroyed.” He pointed to a painted fan that looked old and fragile. “That’s Chi-Pei’s Wind Breaker. It’s supposed to be one of the first staff to have been made. That’s Alexander the Great’s chest plate. There’s Brutus’s knife. Those two were thought to be myths. And there are some I can’t even tell you what they are.” He looked at the bone feather again. “Other than old and powerful.” He rubbed his fingers together.

“I guess it’s a shame they have to be destroyed then,” Paul said, infected by Grant’s awe.

“Yes.” Grant shook himself. “Yes,” he said more forcefully, “but it has to be done. It’s better for them if they are destroyed rather than used how the Chamber intends. The universe would never want the creativity it bestowed on us to be twisted this way.” He pulled Excalibur from its scabbard. “But it is a shame the craftsmanship that went into making this has to be destroyed in the process.”

Paul stayed by Grant as the kangaroo walked around the large room, studying it with a critical eye instead of awe now. The lack of guard made him nervous. It was unnatural. This was years, centuries’ worth of effort left for them to waltz in and break? They were missing something, he knew that, but what that might be, he couldn’t figure out.

“Out of curiosity,” Thomas said, suddenly walking next to them, Niel in tow, “but how much power is tearing this down going to take?”

“Not that much,” Grant replied distractedly. “With the right source and the right focal point. Excalibur came about in the process of breaking tyrannical holds. It doesn’t take much to make that concept able to break anything, and this,” he motioned around them, “is definitely tyranny.”

“So why not simply slash through everything?” Neil asked,

Grant chuckled. “I wouldn’t expect a fan of history to be in such a hurry to see all this destroyed, but I can’t just slash through this. Bringing this down requires precision.” He paused, slowed, then stopped, looking around.

“What is it?” Paul asked, straining to detect what had Grant on alert.

“It’s too precise.”

“Isn’t that the point of engineering?” Thomas asked. “Especially structural engineering? That’s what making buildings is, right?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Grant slowly turned in place. “It’s the way the staves have been positioned. I can’t tell what they all are, but I know a lot of those staves and what they mean, and how they’re placed on the walls. There’s... intention behind that.”

“The intention of giving it some Gothic feel?” the rat asked.

“The way they have the concepts flowing next and around each other, it’s... it’s the way I think when I...” he stopped moving. “Oh possibilities, no.” He ran to the bone feather, then to a stone carving that looked too rough to have been intentional. Another bone had Grant’s attention, this one with intricate carvings that Paul couldn’t stop from wanting to be a language.

“There’s no way this is real,” Grant whispered, dismay mixing with fear.

“Grant, what is it?” Thomas asked.

“I was wrong... I think we were all wrong. Thomas, this isn’t a collection of staves to

be used in a ceremony. I thought... I thought they'd turned them into a talisman, the way they have the concepts weaving around, but I'm wrong. All of this, it's a staff."

"You can make a staff from other staves?" Thomas asked.

"It's never been done, but it gets worse."

"How does it get worse than a staff of staves?" Niel asked. "Isn't that like the ring to rule them all?"

"They made it around pieces of old gods, dead gods. Gods that came before those that exist now."

"Wait, I thought the gods were always around," Paul said, wrenching his gaze from the wall.

"They come and go," Thomas said. "Gods need followers, so if people stop believing in the power they represent, they fade away, they die. There used to be a faction around the power of water itself, but they're gone now."

"Why?" Niel asked.

Thomas shrugged. "No one knows. At least when I was told about it, that's the conclusion they'd reached."

"So the Chamber made a staff with pieces of old gods," Paul's said. "And they're going to use it to kill the current gods?"

"No, they didn't make it to use." Excalibur slipped from Grant's hand and clattered to the stone floor. "They made it for me to break."

Paul stared at the kangaroo, trying to comprehend what that meant.

The silence was broken by a slow clapping and Paul was on alert, turning in its direction as a koala stepped around nothing and came into view. He was dressed in jeans and a shirt with embroidered details to it that made Paul hyper-aware of them.

"I was really hoping you wouldn't notice that," the koala said. His English was American, something from Louisiana (can be changed if there is a specific place Grant's adoptive father is from) to Paul's ears. And somehow, there was pride in his voice. "But I should have known better, shouldn't I, Son?"