

Storyboard-36

“How could you do this?” Grant demanded, kept from reaching the seal by three men holding him back with effort.

Wassa stood in the center of the tent, with sigils around her designed to prevent her from escaping. Paul didn’t know if they could hold someone powerful enough to wield water the way she did and put herself in suspended animation for centuries, but she wasn’t testing them. She stood there, calm and collected in contrast to the kangaroo’s fury.

“Did he spend any time in San Francisco Bay while I wasn’t looking?” Thomas asked. “Because that’s Orr level strength and anger I’ve never seen him display, and I’ve seen him facing off against Kingsley, three times.”

“She just betrayed us,” Niel said. “I think it’s understandable he’s angry.”

“He doesn’t have Arnold’s gift,” Paul said, thinking of his own flaring temper. “If he did, they wouldn’t be holding him back. He’d be beating them up in the process of reaching her.”

“I do,” she said, tone hard. “What must be done.”

“You must betray us?” Grant demanded. “What kind of bullshit is that?”

“I have tried the other way,” she replied, her tone darkening, “but you will not listen. You will not understand what you are. You continue believing you are a Practitioner without a staff when you are so much more.”

“So what? You’re going to work with that wolf because he also thinks I’m so fucking special?”

“I will work with him because it will create the situation where you will shine and lead us to victory!”

The kangaroo stared at her. “I am not some savior,” he stated. “We are going to win this.” He motioned to the people assembled in the large tent. “All of us working together.”

“And what can they do without you?” he asked.

“I’m not a leader!”

“This doesn’t need a leader,” she said, nearly in disgust. “There have always been too many of those. Leaders, in a hurry to take control and lead the situation astray. This doesn’t need one of those. It needs you. It needs hope!”

Grant let out a mirthless bark of laughter.

“That is what you are, Grant. You are the beacon of hope in the center of the storm. The stronger the storm, the brighter you shine, and the stronger you are. Did you not see what you did at the beach?”

“That was Excalibur.”

“It was Excalibur in your hands. Powered by the hope the storm can be defeated.”

“You’re insane,” the kangaroo said with a chuckle. “That’s the only answer. You’re fucking insane.”

“What I am,” Wassa replied proudly, “is willing to do whatever must be done to make sure the Chamber does not get to succeed. If I had been willing to sully myself the previous time, we would not be here today.”

“You mean we’d all be under the Chamber’s control,” Grant spat and surged forward with enough speed the men couldn’t grab him. Thomas appeared before the kangaroo, grabbing him by an arm, then Paul was there with Niel and Roland, holding him back. “Let go of me so I can wring her fucking neck.”

“You can’t do that,” Thomas said.

“Why? Because I’m such a paragon of hope?”

“Because she still has to answer questions,” Paul replied. “And you shouting at her doesn’t seem to give us anything useful.”

“Well, it’s fucking useful to me.”

“Grant,” Niel said, “how about we let the others deal with this? I think cooler heads will have a better chance at getting her to talk.”

The kangaroo glared at the seal. “We’re not done,” he snarled. Turning around so suddenly, the four of them nearly fell. Thomas, Niel, and Roland were quick to follow him, while Paul hesitated. He wasn’t as close to the kangaroo as the other three, so he wasn’t sure how much use he’d be there.

But on the other hand, he knew he would be of no use here. The others in the tent were experienced in getting information out of people. Probably using methods Paul wouldn’t like to watch. If anyone had the chance to get through the armor of someone who had been willing to spend centuries in ice in the hopes the right person would show up one day, it was them, not him.

Donal hurried to join Paul as he followed after the others out of the artificial light and into the woods.

“What happened?” the squirrel asked. “I heard Grant scream.”

“Wassa is in league with the Chamber.”

“No,” Donal said in disbelief, and Paul shrugged.

“No wonder the Chamber was at the lake before we were ready,” Grand snarled. “She told them we were going there.” The kangaroo was pacing a small circle, kicking the ground every so often. “All those men died because of her. I can’t believe I believed anything she said to me.” He took Excalibur and threw it to the ground. It landed neat Roland, who took a step back.

“Are we sure she’s working with them?” Donal asked.

“I caught her talking with God Wolf,” Paul said. “Then she attacked me,” he added as the squirrel opened his mouth.

“But I don’t get it,” Niel said. “Why? If her goal is the same as the Chamber, why go into cryo-sleep for a thousand year? Wouldn’t it make more sense for her to stick around and help them?”

“Maybe she wanted to be sure she was around to benefit from what they’re doing?”

Roland offered.

“She probably thinks she’s the one who should absorb all the gods,” Grant grumbled.

“But she saved us from the Chamber,” Donal said.

“Did she?” Thomas asked. “Did she know they were chamber? She saw a conflict. A lot of aggressors, a few prisoners. No matter who we were, we’d be the easiest ones to deal with.”

“I am so fucking pissed!”

“Grant, she fooled everyone,” Niel said.

“I was raised by one of them!” the kangaroo snapped. “I spent my life doing everything I can to stop them from pulling in others, and what do I do? I swallow her story without questions.”

“To be fair,” Paul said, “you questioned her a lot.” The kangaroo glared at him, then at the sword on the ground.

“That was probably her plan all along. Get me to push myself to apotheosis with that thing.”

“Can that happen?” Niel asked. “I thought you could only do that with your own staff.”

“And I’m not supposed to be able to break it and survive, so who fucking knows.”

“She believes what she said,” Denton said, joining them.

Grant rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t trust one thing she said.”

“I’m not. She didn’t say it, it’s in what she thought.”

“Wait, you read minds?” Roland said, his ears folding back.

The cheetah chuckled. “Only surface thoughts and yours are no different from most of the men here.” He focused on Grant again. “But I also think she’s right about you.”

“I’m not some savior,” Grant said in exasperation.

“Take it from someone who’s been in your position. If your god’s made you his champion, you should—”

“I don’t have a god.” Grant ran a hand over his face. “I really wish you would all stop trying to force us to be the same as the rest of you.”

Paul watched as Denton controlled himself and didn’t reply. The cheetah glanced in his direction, gave him a small smile and a shrug, and Paul’s ears folded back in embarrassment. What had he seen in his mind?

“Alright,” Denton said. “Regardless of that, there is something different about you and her.”

“And you know that how?” Grant asked sarcastically.

“Magic.” The cheetah paused while Grant rolled his eyes. “I have a sense of it. You aren’t the first Practitioner I’ve encountered, although he never told me what he was. The people who handle the staves had a sense of the magic coursing through them. Your’s and hers, it’s not like that. It’s more like the magic that is in that.” He pointed at the sword.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. But it’s why she contacted God Wolf. She believes he’s like you and

her.”

“Is he?” Thomas asked.

Denton shrugged. “I’ve never been near him, so I can’t tell you.”

“He did say you and him were the same, back in Italy,” Niel said. “A lot.”

Grant didn’t look happy. “Fine, that doesn’t help us unless you think I can lure God Wolf out because we’re the same. And if one of you even makes a comment about me using my looks so he’s come to my bed, I swear I am going to do something really nasty to you.”

“Like that would take a lot of work,” Neil said. “God Wolf’s clearly hot for you.”

“Niel,” Grant warned.

“I’m just saying that you flash that body of yours to him and he gets kind of single-minded about making you his.”

“What if you flashed a different body before him?” Paul said, as the idea popped into his head, then realized what he’s said. “I don’t mean actually flashing her body before him.”

“Flashing whose body?” Grant asked as Denton covered his smile with a hand.

“Not actually flashing anyone,” Paul stated. “But we have a lot of magic around. If one of them can make you look like Wassa, can’t you call God Wolf and tell him to let you in so you can join force?”

“We do have the talisman she used to contact him,” Denton said as Grant looked about to protest. “My concern is that God Wolf might be able to sense that you aren’t her, the way he and she seem to know that you’re different from ordinary Practitioners.”

Grant shook his head. “I doubt that happens over a projection, which is the only way it could happen, but I don’t know him. I can’t just send a general call and hope he picks up. With the magic Donal and Code have floating around the mansion, I need a targeted signal. And I am nowhere near familiar enough with him for that.”

“But you’re more familiar with him than she is, right?” Thomas said. “She’s been in his presence one time, for not even five minutes. You’ve been in his presence multiple times. Even if we don’t count Monaco—”

“Please don’t,” Grant said, ears folding back.

“You’ve been close enough to touch him half a dozen times. You’ve smelled him. And with Monaco, you have smelled him from really up close.”

“Thomas,” Grant warned.

Paul exchanged a look with Niel and Roland, hoping one of them know what Monaco was about because Thomas had never mentioned that city to him. They appeared as confused as he felt. He looked to Denton, since the cheetah had to know what Grant was thinking, but his face was impartial and he wasn’t looking in the golden tiger’s direction.

The kangaroo sighed. “Fine. I guess we need to do something, and that’s an idea. At worse, it’s not going to work and we aren’t any further up shit’s creek. I’m going to need to see what she used and I’m going to need material to make my illusion.”

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The look was perfect, as far as Paul could tell. Before them stood Wassa in her pale blue robe. Her arms crossed over her chest and the scowl as they all looked her over was entirely Grant.

“Are you done gawking?” she asked.

“I’m not gawking.” Thomas said, “I’m admiring. You make a beautiful—”

“I’m going to hit you,” she said.

“Sorry, I’m not interested in women,” the rat replied with a smirk.

She rolled her eyes and walked toward the talisman on the ground with none of the grace the real Wassa displayed.

“You guys are going to want to stand away,” she told them. “We know from Paul that God Wolf can see what’s going on around me through this.”

Paul stepped behind the trees along with the others.

They’d discussed placing the call under a more controlled environment, such as in one of the tents, but the question of how credible it was Wassa would call him from within the camp after going to the extent of doing it in the woods had been raised and not satisfactorily answered.

“I guess you didn’t get caught,” God Wolf said after a minute of quiet, during which Paul expected Grant was getting the talisman working. “I was wondering if I’d ever find out why you wanted to talk when you didn’t do this again.”

“They were never going to capture me,” she answered, “but ensuring I was safely away took time. But I am here, and I am ready to make my offer.”

“You think you have something I want?”

“I do not have him.” She said, and Paul thought that was going too far. “But I have something I believe you are the rightful heir to.”

“I thought you’d given that to him.”

Paul looked at Thomas, hoping to get confirmation he’d heard the hunger in the voice, but the rat was looking around the tree at the conversation. Paul didn’t dare.

“His role was to forge it, not wield it, but I had to have him believe it was is, appeal to his need to be special or—”

“He is special. He is like us.”

“No one is like you,” She replied, and Paul was amazed at Grant’s ability to make her sound enticing when he disliked God Wolf so much. “You are the only rightful bearer of Excalibur. It should be in your hand when the time comes. And it will be my honor to hand it to you personally. You have but to tell me where to be so I can deliver it.”

The silence stretched and Paul gave in to his curiosity. From where he stood, he saw the two of them in profile. Wassa holding Excalibur before the massive wolf, head bowed, and God Wolf looking down at it hungrily.

“Be at the south side of the property in thirty minutes,” the wolf said. “There’s a servant’s gate there. I think that is the perfect place for you to join us.”

“I shall be there as requested... my liege.”

God Wolf puffed out his chest before his image disappeared.

“I am going to stab him with this thing,” she snarled, her voice deepening as her appearance changed with the cloak Grant removed. [this can be changed if you have a better ideas] It was more mirror than anything else, like an unfolded disco ball. Grant had mentioned the concepts the broken mirrors brought, false images being reflected, control

of the light, and what others saw. There were other items on the inside to direct the ideas and shape them into the specific result they're seen, but image had been the primary one.

"That's part one successful," Denton said. Instead of the suit Paul was used to seeing him in, he wore the same black and gray body armor as the six men around him did. "Now, we need to get in position. Thomas, how confident you can get the men with you inside?"

The Rat joined another group of men in black and gray. "It's line of sight, I'll be fine. The number of people doesn't matter so long as we have direct contact. I thought you'd practiced it."

"I did, but I have a larger reserve of energy than you do. What I can do with your power doesn't reflect what you are capable of doing with it."

"That is cheating," Thomas said.

"Blame our god." Denton looked at Paul, Neil, and Roland. "Niel, I need you to gather your friends and be ready. There's no telling how long it'll take me to find the source of the forcefield or to negate the magic powering it, but you've studied the caverns, so you need to lead some of the men through them."

"My father will be overjoyed," the raccoon said, with too much happiness for Paul's liking.

"I'm with Thomas," Roland said before Denton spoke. "I don't take a lot of space."

The cheetah nodded. Since he could read minds, he knew it was useless trying to keep the brothers apart through this. "Paul, get your men ready. As I said to Niel, there's no telling when the forcefield will go down, but once it does, everyone needs to move quickly."

"We'll be ready," Paul said, and headed back to the camp.