

Storyboard-4

Paul straightened and realized the lighting was wrong, too dark. He pushed the airbag down and on the other side of the cracked windshield, the air was brown and green. And odd shapes floated on the windshield itself, like electrical sparks within the glass. They were captivating.

He still had a hand on the coffee mug, keeping it in the holder.

Then the reason he'd done that came back to him. Crashing through the bridge's railing, the free fall, the impact with the water, hitting something then... straightening in his seat.

His feet were dry, and he looked at the symbols in the windshield, then the unconscious pangolin in the passenger seat.

The car shifted and the golden tiger realized they hadn't hit bottom yet.

"Shila." He should her and she flayed awake.

She looked around, breathing hard, eyes wide.

"We're okay." He motioned to the windshield. "What you did worked." He looked at the mug. "Do you need coffee?"

"Do I look like I should drink coffee?" she demanded, eyes focusing.

"I've seen all kinds of reactions to coffee deprivation from the medical students. From barely being conscious, to being more hyper than when they're fully dosed."

She shook her head and he took a long sip. He had the feeling this was his last chance to enjoy this coffee. "So, what's the next step? Do we stay in here until whoever you arranged to rescue us gets here? I'm going to guess the magic you have in place is going to keep us supplied with air."

She shook her head again. "But I can fix that last one."

"Then what is the plan?"

"We get the fuck out of here before the Chamber has someone in the water." She typed on her phone. "Don't take yours yet. I'm not done with it."

"The car's dead, I doubt it'll make a difference if it's in the slot or my hand."

"Where do you think I stored the talisman that's keeping the water out?"

"I thought a talisman was something physical you made to get your magic working."

She eyed him.

"I'm the one Thomas comes to after a bad day. I have heard a lot about the Society, Practitioners, Green Men, the Chamber, and magic overall."

She smiled a little, then was focused on the phone again. "It isn't because you can't see it without help, that it's not physical."

Paul started to protest, then looked at the symbols. Sparks in the windshield. Electricity was definitely physical. He's seen enough electrical injuries out of the engineering labs to know that.

She put her phone in the bathrobe's pocket. "Water's going to come in when you take it out. I added a program to keep you from drowning, so don't lose it. We get out head for the shore, then get a car and run."

"In my pocket like you?" he asked, taking hold of the phone.

"Yeah."

He pulled it and water rushed in from the door seams and the cracks in the windshield as the symbols blinked out. Shila tried to open her door, and when it didn't, she put her shoulder against it, then slammed it into the window.

"No, no, no, no," she said, voice rising. Paul put a hand on hers as she went to pull the phone from her pocket. "I have to break this." Her eyes were going wilder. "I don't know how the chamber got to us, but—"

"You need to breathe Shila. We're underwater."

"I know that! You think the water's just appearing in here?"

"Water's heavier than air, we're in the low-pressure side. The door will open once it equalizes."

"I know—" She looked at the door. "I know that." She calmed. "Fuck, I know that."

"You're doing better?"

She nodded.

He drained the coffee and she eyed him again. He smiled. "I like my coffee."

"You know it's a drug, right?"

"There are worse ones out there." The water was to his crotch, but his fur wasn't getting wet. His clothing tightened against his body from the water pressing against it, but it was as if they were watertight.

His breathing sped up as the water rose to his chest. He'd be fine, he reminded himself. Shila's magic would protect him. But the pressure told him his body wasn't made to survive underwater. Even Shila was pushing herself to the ceiling as the water kept rising.

"Take a deep breath," he told her as the water reached his chin, with his head pressed against the roof.

"You don't have to, the talisman—"

"Shila, you're panicking. Take a breath, then we're going underwater and out of the car. On three. One, two..." he trailed until she was focused on him and her eyes not as wild. "Three." He took a breath with her, then they sank. The door resisted but finally opened. He kicked out and turned. Shila stumbled out and flayed about, starting to panic again. He swam to her, place her arm around his shoulder, and kicked...

"Where are we going?" he asked, feeling stupid for talking out loud underwater. It wasn't like—

"North side," she replied, her voice sounded distorted, and he realized it came from his phone. "South takes us back into the city."

He nodded. "Which way is North?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Tried again, looked around. Then, defeated, she shrugged.

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They stepped out of the water on the rocks beyond Lime Point Lighthouse. Once Paul was close enough to the surface to make out the sun, he was able to orient himself. The rocks weren't easy to climb, but they made it to the path, and with Shila's magic keeping them dry, they didn't look too out of place. If a woman in a bathrobe over the tracksuit could be said not to attract attention. Paul suggested she leave it behind, but didn't push after the glare she gave him. After all, he was magical, so it was possible her looks could kill.

By the time they made it to the start of the trail, the sun was close to the horizon, and the parking lot was rather busy with people stopping for a break on their way home, or going for a walk along the multiple trails.

They walked along the parked cars, looking for one to take. The only criteria the pangolin had were tinted windows. The darker the better. She worked on his phone while he looked. When he found one, she handed him the phone back, and after checking no one was paying them any attention they headed for it.

He tapped the unlock on his phone and the doors unlocked. They got in, he slotted the phone and the car started. He drove out of the lot, checking behind for anyone running at them screaming. No one. He glanced at the pangolin who was again working on her phone, wondering if that was more of her magic.

He made a mental note to seek out the owner of the car once he had her in a safe place and see about working out a way to pay them back for this.

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They were driving through San Rafael when Paul had enough of the silence. She's stopped working on her phone by the time they passed the exit to the one thirty-one and had been staring at it. He didn't know everything there was to know about magic, but he figured she needed to do something for her to be working on it.

"Where are we going?"

She didn't react.

He gave her a few minutes.

"Shila, I need to know where we're going."

"Can this thing make it to Alaska?"

He glanced at the charge readout, three quarter of one, seven hours, before the state name registered. Was she serious?

He tried to gauge it with glances, but he didn't know her well, and scaled faces weren't as easy to read as furred ones, the lack of external ears didn't help. He saw the sign for the mall and decided that was as good a place to iron out a few things as any and drifted onto the ramp.

"What are you doing?" She asked as he stopped for the light at the end of it. He made the right, then the left into the parking lot with the multiple restaurants. "Paul, what the fuck are—"

"One, Shila, I haven't eaten anything since lunch. I was heading to dinner with friends when I detoured to help you. Two, I'm not Thomas, I don't have a deal with you to drop my life anytime you call. Three, I don't actually know you. Thomas has told me a good deal, but that doesn't mean much when you have me drive off a bridge, then tell me to drive until the

end of the world. If your plan is to just keep driving. You can sit here and I'll get a share-ride back home."

She swallowed.

"You don't know how to drive, do you?"

"What the fuck do you think? Do I look like someone who goes out for joy rides? I order in, the friends I have I talk with online. The few who I let visit me come to my place. That was *my* place. The one place I was safe. The one I had warded from here to kingdom come! So no, I don't fucking know how to drive."

Paul crossed his arms over the steering wheel and looked out at the people going about their normal lives. His had been normal, with the exception of what Henry had done to him. Even with Thomas and knowing about magic. He's still had what he considered a normal life. What he saw of magic was through his friends and friends of theirs.

Even they were normal to his mind. And that meant they knew what they were doing with their lives. Magic seemed to make that easier. So he'd expected Shila to be much like them because she was magical.

She was even more out of her element than he was.

"How safe is it to make calls?"

She shook her head and he tilted an ear.

"Shila, I need you to do more than nod, shake your head, or panic. What I know of you, the internet is your magical playground. So why don't you think it's safe to make a call?"

She sighed, and Paul saw her pull herself together as best she could. Having something concrete to do helps people not panic. Gave them a sense of control, as small and fleeting as it might be. He'd picked that up from his psychology roommate in his first year.

"I just have my phone. It's more powerful than you'd think but the Chamber's assault on my apartment burned down the offsite servers I use. I can keep your phone from being found, but I have no way to be certain whoever you're going to call will be secure."

"Do you have any idea how the Chamber found you? How they knew how to keep Thomas from coming to your help?"

"No. It should have been impossible. I'm the one who fucking set up my protection and no one's better than I am at it." She became quiet. "Maybe I can program a precognition talisman..." she looked at her phone. "I need more, but... Google's not too far, if I get near I can get into their quantum machine. I'm going to need something like to think laterally enough to overcome whatever the Chamber uses to hide what gave my location."

"You're not hacking Google," Paul stated. Stealing a car to survive was one thing. Letting her do that when she admitted to not having all her tools available, that was suicide. Google was a mega-corporation, there was no way they would mess around with their server security.

"I have to. I need to come up with a way to find out how they did something like this. It's either google or Nasa, and Nasa's quantum array is on the east coast. Do you have any idea what it takes to find out how they pulled this off? It's like..." she looked about to

scream. “It’s like looking for a needle lost in a pile of needles and the only difference between them is that the hole for the thread is a little smaller.”

The word lost stuck in Paul’s brain, something, no, someone Thomas had told him about, back from when he’d been on the run from his friend at the frat. He’d ended up in—
“What about the guy in Denver?”

She looked at him uncomprehendingly.

Now that he remembered the city, he remembered more of the stories. “Donal, he’s a Practitioner like you, his thing is finding stuff that’s been lost. He’s a friend of Thomas.”

Her expression brightened. “Yes, I know who you mean, if one Practitioner could do it, it’d be him.”

“So, Denver?”

She smiled. “Denver.”

Storyboard-5

Thomas's stories of his trip from San Francisco to Denver was nothing like what Paul was experiencing. For one thing, he was driving, while Thomas had spent the time in the back of a van having sex. For another, he didn't have to debate how much he could push for things being done his way, when the person he was traveling with was dealing with the entirety of her life thrown in shambles because people were out to kill her, while he'd had to settle for food out of a drive in instead of Judith's cooking.

There had also been no talk of stealing a car, or Shila hacking one of the rare cash machine, possibly the only one in Santa Rosa so they'd have money to pay for a motel room. That the clerk hadn't even flickered an ear when Paul paid with some of that cash money made him question the wisdom that everyone had gone electronic decades ago.

They were somewhere near the Oregon border. Paul had driven as long as he'd been able to, but he had been up early to pack away his apartment, and since his thesis hadn't been something requiring long days and longer nights, he hadn't become someone running on coffee, so after the second he'd bought while the car was charging, he'd insisted they needed a place to stop for the night.

The motel was small, not a franchise, and offered charging free of charge with their stay. Even better, because the town was just large enough to have a night life, there was a late night convenience store on the other side of the road.

There he did get something of a look when he paid cash, but that had been annoyance as the clerk had to go in the back to get his change. Paul had expected to be informed that if he didn't buy the exact amount of the bill he was using, a twenty, he wasn't getting change.

It wasn't his money, so Paul had been ready to lose the three or four dollars that he'd be owed. It wasn't like the money belonged to anyone. He expected Shila had simply told the cash machine the transaction was in order and to hand out the money. The bank would be taking the hit, and they had insurance against these kind of things.

Well, probably not against magical hacking, but it was still hacking, and that had to be covered.

He entered the room and the pangolin was stretched on her bed, looking at her phone, but not typing, and not looking only this side of freaking out.

"I have burgers, drinks, fruits and cookies," he announced. "A better selection than I expected considering we're as close to nowhere as I've ever been. How are you feeling?" he handed her one of the burgers with a selection of condiments for her to add. She hadn't looked in a state to field a questionnaire about what she wanted to eat. She'd had a burger at the drive through, so he'd known that was safe.

"This place isn't going to help me get into the FBI, but their server's solid enough I

was about to install extra protection. No one's going to find us unless they already know we're in this building and I've added everything I could think of to scramble precognition, remove viewing and whatever far-something someone might be able to cobble together up to them having access to your cum."

Paul stared at her.

"You do know what someone can do with that, right?"

"Just about everyone I know in the magical community is Society," Paul replied.

"Yes, I'm well aware of what's capable with that. Which is why I'm not in the habit of leaving any lying around."

"Shower?" he asked. The air was slightly humid, but scales didn't show the result of one as readily as fur.

"Go ahead, already had one."

He ate first.

Once he was washed and as dried as the two towels allowed him to be, he stretched.

"If you want to surf the net, you can do that, I've anonymized your phone, but don't contact anyone. I have no way to know the kind of power the Chamber had set up to intercept calls to your friends."

"How about messaging? I can get on a public site, create a one time account to let them know."

"Already done."

His phone buzzed and he looked at the message from a Sheallie Fortune, out of GroupTalk that had been sent to her nearly two hundred friends. A quick check of the list showed him many names he knew among a lot more he didn't.

"Is everyone real?" he asked, noting a name that concerned him.

"Yeah. I grabbed them off the site at random. The Chamber would notice if it was all bots except for the people who matter. The message's veiled enough the rest won't care all that much."

Paul read the message.

"Hey friends, me and Paulie are off on an adventure after my place was forcefully redecorated(don't ask). Don't worry, he's just as safe as I am, but we're going to be off the grid for a bit because what goes with an adventure but a lack of safety net, right? Chat when we come up for air."

He looked at her. "My Mon's in that list."

"Figured you'd want her to know." The pangolin looked at him. "She does know, right?"

Paul nodded. After what Henry had done to his memory, and everything else that had happened around the Hertz, the only way his mother could have been kept in the dark was to have someone alter her memories. It was suggested, but not recommended. Not that Paul would have allowed it.

So enough had been explained to his mother that she'd understand when Paul had

difficulties differentiating real memories from the ones that had been recovered. She hadn't wanted to know more. Paul was fortunate that as someone Henry paid attention to late in the whole thing, he hadn't had a the chance to make the multiple changes he seemed to enjoy doing. He'd gone extreme on Paul, but he only had five different sets of them, instead of the dozens or in some case hundreds some of the others had to work through.

It had still left his mother worried about what else was out there that could hurt him. Not enough to try and keep him from leaving Minneapolis for his studies, but enough to try and convince him to find a place closer than San Francisco Bay. It was a big city with a lot of not too great rumors about it. But San Francisco University had one of the best Biotech course short of going to the big names.

She didn't know Shila, but she would be suspicious enough to contact the Hertz, and Eric and Nadia would ask Thomas who, if he hadn't worked it out by then, would check in with people in San Francisco.

He really hoped they were to convince her he was fine... well, as fine as he could be. It wasn't like he was the target. Otherwise she was going to freak.

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Paul rushed out of the bathroom, having hears Shila's string of nos that signaled she was panicking as he shut the water off.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Shila, what's wrong?" he repeated when she wouldn't look up from her phone. She glanced him, eyes wide. Instead of saying anything, she swiped toward the screen on the wall and it came on with a news segment.

"As of two hours age," a fox in a suit seated behind a desk said somberly, "a state of emergency has been declared for the city of Denver, an a quarantine has been imposed. Information is still difficult to obtain, but we have Jennifer standing by in Parker, where the Military had been setting up one of the check-points. Jennifer, what can you tell us?"

"Not very much, Gregory," a woman answered, the still of a bovine wearing glasses in a sports jacket appearing over the fox's right shoulder. "The National Guard is preventing anyone from entering unless they have medical credentials. The CDC is reported to be on site, but I haven't been able to confirm it. The little I have managed to gather is terrifying enough."

"Jennifer?" Gregory asked when the silence stretched. He looked to someone off camera and opened his mouth when she said.

"It's the Black Death, Greg."

Storyboard-6

They were stopped in a town less than thirty miles from Denver and forced to park in a mall when they couldn't show some kind of credentials from the medical field. It didn't matter how much Shila tried to refer them to the extensive site she'd created for them during the drive. Without a piece of plastic the soldier could scan, they weren't getting through.

Unfortunately, those were beyond the capability of her phone.

Ultimately, it wasn't the Black Death. The CDC had been on site, and the day after the quarantine went up they'd given a statement. It was severe, possibly on par with the Black Death, but they had confirmed it wasn't it. Which was both good and bad news. As deadly as the Black Death had been, it had been studied, and could be fought easily. This new strain was proving more difficult to pin down.

"But," the older beaver had said, "so long as we keep our heads, take precautions, and work together, we will get through this."

Shila hadn't had much flattering to say after listening to that clip, and Paul wanted to be more generous, but one thing history classes, all the way back in high school, had showed, was that as a country, his wasn't great at doing the right thing in an emergency.

Paul rested his arms on the steering wheel and looked out on the parking lot. It wasn't as full as he'd expected it to be. It had been three days since the quarantine had been put in place and while they were on a back road for another reason. The National Guard's presence showed they expected people to try to brake it this way.

Most of the vehicles were news vans from agencies so small some didn't even have names on them. They made Shila nervous, and he understood her. While the Chamber couldn't expect them to come here, it was only a question of money to set up face recognitions software to look at all video feeds these days. And one thing Paul had noticed was that magic people had money. His Thomas, who'd grown up solidly middle class with him, was now rich because of what his magic let him do.

It was why they'd avoided the major roads or cities on the way here.

"No, no, no, no."

"What—"

"Move," Shila ordered. "We need to leave, drive, now!"

Paul drove toward one of the lot's exits.

The pangolin looked over her shoulder then sank down in her seat. "The Chamber's here."

"How? You said you had programs hiding us, right?"

She looked terrified. She'd seemed so confident that it would be enough. Paul

couldn't imagine what it could be like to realize that someone was strong enough to undercut your protection like that.

The soldier stopped them, and Paul explained they were leaving the area since it wasn't safe. She looked in the car, then arranged to have two other soldiers escort them to the road and see them on their way.

"Did they see you?" He asked. If Denver was off limit because they were expected there. Where else could they go? Paul knew of cities in the country where Society families were in charge, but other than the Richards, who he only had had indirect contact with. He didn't know anyone who would listen.

"No, she was giving a report."

Shila was looking at her phone, typing and swiping. Paul parked at a charging station just out of the town. They might as well get that down while they worked out their next move.

She showed him her phone, on it a calico cat was talking about the emergency. She was petite, in a blouse, with her face fur trimmed in what Paul thought straight men found appealing. He'd seen the style on the girls at school.

"I'm not seeing it. Is it the microphone? Is that the staff?"

Shila swiped and symbols trailed her fingers, and the blouse and well trimmed fur dissolved into a plain looking calico dressed in the most garish coat Paul had ever seen. There were so many colors on it, no one in their—

So many colors.

"Are you telling me the coat of many colors is a real thing?" he asked, dismayed.

"How the fuck would I know that? I don't know where that thing's from. Ask Grant. He'd the vaunted know-it-all when it come to staves. But she means they're here. So—"

"Are you sure she's here for you?"

"Who else would she be here for?"

"I don't know, but Donal is in Denver. Do you know of any other Practitioner there?"

She opened here mouth, then closed it, looking outside. "Merlin."

"I'm going to guess that's a different one than the the round table one."

She nodded. "He's a doctor. A plague would be the perfect thing to draw him out. He was in Denver last time I checked on him. Attached himself to a private security company years ago as protection from the Chamber, but this... if that's for him. He won't be able to stay out of it, so all the Chamber needs to do is have people near the hot spots and they'll get him."

"Can we help him?" Paul asked. "Should we? I mean if they capture him, is he in danger, it's his staff they want, right?"

"They can't get it unless they push him to Apotheosis. He'll be dead," she cut off his question, so not an ascension the way he'd expected. "That's all that matters for us. Then they can take his staff."

"So do we help him? Can we help him if the Chamber is also after you, or can they get you to reach that apotheosis state too?"

She shook her head. "They already tried in San Francisco. The attack on my home

was about pushing me past my limits, but I was smarter than they were. I have breakers in place, you could call them. They blew the servers before I could reach my limit and also threw what they were doing in shamble long enough I could get out, call you and we could run.”

Paul nodded. “Okay, so the way I’m seeing this. The chamber cut you off from anyone who could help you, then stressed you until you, died.”

“It’s not death to me. But it’s complicated.”

Paul nodded again. “But being isolated was key to pushing you to that state. So it’s probably what they’re doing with this Doc Merlin here, right?”

“Probably.”

“Then the best we you can be safe,” he said, starting the car. “Is by increasing the number of allies. We get to Donal. He’s a local, so he’s going to know where the doctor is, right? That’s going to be three Practitioners together against whatever the Chamber has. That’s got to be better than just one, right?”

She nodded. It was hesitating, but it was a nod.

“Good, now, please tell me that my little speech got your imagination going, because I have no idea how I can get us past the National guard.”