

# Storyboard, 1.5-1

“And, having supported his theorem before a board of his former teachers, now peers,” the panther said, her smooth voice amplified over the university park where the ceremony was taking place, “I welcome Doctor Paul Heeran into the fold.”

The golden tiger stepped forward, the warm and humid San Francisco Bay breeze catching in his black robe. He shook the dean’s hand as she handed him the rolled-up paper, the symbol of his graduation.

“Good work,” she said, away from the microphone as his friends cheered from the crowd over the applause, “And good luck with your future.”

He smiled at her. Dean Johanson also came from the biochemistry field, so while she never got directly involved in his or any of the other students, she made sure to remain appraised of how each was doing.

Then, because dancing was one of the things he was know for outside of courses, he did a series of taps and a pirouette as he returned to his seat. The Dean rolled her eyes at his antics before announcing the next graduate.

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And with a flourish, the panther turned and presented the now standing ex-students. “The graduates of the year 2058, ladies and gentlemen.” This time the applause and cheers were loud and heartfelt as everyone cheered for who they were here for at the same time.

As with at least half the group, Paul didn’t wait for it to be over to run off the stage, avoiding a few collisions because of his nimble feet, and remaining on them when Geral Naumer purpose shoulder-checked him because of years of dancing with guys who had no real idea how to do it.

It had always amused him how everyone took his ‘if you want to sleep with me you need to be able to dance with me’ rule literally, instead of understanding that to be able to dance with your partner you needed to get to know him quite well.

He saw his mother, the only other golden tiger there, and his friends behind her and headed for them. It was impossible to miss the wall of muscle of a tiger even if he stood behind everyone, but Paul pushed the surprise at seeing him here away, and focused on hugging his mother.

“Oh Paul, I am so proud of you.” The last words stretched into a yell of surprise as he picked her up and twirled her, then deposited her back down. “Shame on you, Paul Heeran,” she said with a chuckle. “Treating your sainted mother with such disregard for her dignity.”

“I’m just glad to finally be able to move,” he replied, putting an arm around her shoulder and hugging the rat with the other.

“Doctor Heeran,” Judith cooed, “I have this pain each time my husband comes into bed with me. Do you have anything to prescribe?”

“Wrong kind of Doctor,” Paul replied as he hugged her husband. “But have him sleep

in my bed. I can take that-”

“Paul Heeran, we’re in public,” his mother chastised him.

“It’s alright, Misses Heeran,” Trevor said. “It’s just talk. The doing takes place in private.” He winked at Paul.

She shook her head. “Kids. In my days, we knew to act with decorum in public. There was no talk of what we were going to do in the bedroom.”

“Wasn’t ‘in your days’,” Paul said, “that time when you went from party to party and tried just about every drug in existence?”

“I never,” Sophia Heeran replied with a grinned huff. “And I was still a girl, not a woman.”

He kissed one of his mother’s cinnamon-colored stripes on her head. “I know, you were such a saint.” He let her go to hug the third rat. “Mad, so glad you made it.” Then he whispered. “You didn’t have to bring your boss, you know.”

“He insisted.”

“Oh Dear God,” his mother exclaimed as Dietrich Orr stepped forward. She stepped back in turn, raising a hand to her mouth.

“It’s okay, mom.” Paul was at her side. “He might look imposing and scary, but he’s just...” he trailed off, looking for a synonym for gentle that had any chance of applying to the man.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Misses Heeran,” Dietrich said with a deep rumble.

“You’re... you’re a friend of my son?” she asked, sounding as if the idea scared her. The tiger tended to have that effect on anyone who didn’t know him, and could engender it even in those who knew him. Paul had heard stories, and believed them. But Dietrich always behaved around him, well, except for the unveiled advances.

“He’s Madoc’s boss,” Paul said.

“Misses H,” the rat said, offering his hand.

She pulled her gaze away from the muscular tiger and onto the muscular rat. “Madoc, it’s good to see you again.”

“Your son and I are,” Dietrich said, pausing just enough to make Paul narrow his eyes. “Acquaintances,” Dietrich finished with a smirk, then made his face neutral as he looked at her. “Madoc introduced us when Paul dropped by one time and... well, your son is quite a captivating man.”

“Misses H,” Madoc said, taking her arm. “How about I show you the park? It’s got a great history.”

She gave Paul a concerned look, but he nodded. While Dietrich wasn’t known for taking no for an answer when he was after something, it meant that he’d work at getting what he wanted instead of doing what the stories said the rest of his family did; just taking it.

“I didn’t expect to see you here, and not dressed like that.” The gray suit the tiger wore was custom made to his large frame, but still looked to be one size too small. Dietrich liked being admired and made sure men had a reason to look at him.

“This is a great moment for you, Paul. Now, you get to take all those theories, all those ideas, and see if you can bend reality to make them happen.”

“If one of the companies I’ve applied to will let me do my own research.”

“So, still no answers?” Dietrich asked, tone casual.

“No, but there are more interviews lined up. I’ll get something.”

Dietrich nodded. “Of that, I have no doubt.” The tiger’s hand stopped before it cupped Paul’s cheeks and lowered. Dietrick was a man who loved to touch other men. There was a lot of physical contact at his gym, a lot more than Paul had ever seen elsewhere, even when he took away the sex. And Paul enjoyed being touched, but he didn’t know the tiger well enough to allow it. “You are a very talented young man, Paul.”

“Are you coming to the party?” Paul asked. “It’s not going to measure up to what you’re used to, but there will be a dance floor.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Dietrick smiled. “But I don’t think we’re there just quite yet.” He offered his hand before Paul could ask what he meant. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to the gym before one of the guys decides to open it to the public.”

Paul shook the large hand, then watched the tiger’s back retreating, again confused. This was San Francisco Bay. Everyone had stories about the Orrs. What they did, what they could do, and what they were rumored to do. By the best accounts, they weren’t nice people, even if they did a lot for the city. But Dietrick was such a contrast to those stories, even the ones about him.

He smiled as Madoc returned with his mother. “See,” he told her. “He’s perfectly safe.”

Madoc snorted, and his mother did not look amused.

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The party room was a compromise, and against Paul’s protest, the people in attendance had all pitched in to pay for it. That they had limited themselves to that when, with a few exceptions, everyone in the room could have afforded the rental fee by themselves, made Paul feel better about the people he considered friends. There were too many stories of the rich bullying their way into everything, even giving you what they felt was best for you.

It had been picked because Thomas could land here and still be conscious. The result of a year and a half fling with the football team’s tight end. Thomas had teleported to one of the rooms in the stadium so often, it might be his most familiar location at this point.

And as he thought of his best friend, the rat entered the room, looking mostly steady on his feet. With him were his parents, Victor and his wife, and Olavo. Eric and Nadia waved at Paul before heading to the table his mother was seated at. Victor and Orinda joined Judith and Trevor. Paul was surprised to see the two men hug. Paul wasn’t as close to Victor as Thomas, or even Neil, but last he’d heard of the man he was still uncomfortable having other men touch him. His reasons for it were traumatic, whereas for Paul it was simply preferences.

“Lav!” Paul hugged the capybara tightly. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Wouldn’t miss a chance to dance with you. It’s been far too long since the last time.”

Olavo released him, and Paul hugged Thomas tightly, the muscular rat nearly

breaking his back in return. “Missed you, Buddy,” Thomas whispered, before kissing Paul’s neck.

“Missed you too.” He let Thomas go, “but you’re the one with the ability to just pop in unannounced, so these months between visit is entirely on you. I have offered to recharge you when you appear in my room utterly exhausted.”

Thomas’s smile became forced. “Not entirely on me.”

Paul looked from the rat to the capybara. “That bad?”

“Busy,” Olavo answered.

“It’s why Grant isn’t with us. He’s in Reykjavik, making arrangements for the next expedition.”

Paul nodded. Ever since Niel’s kidnapping, Grant had been working with allies like Thomas and Olavo to retrieve the hidden staves of his faction and relocate them, trading passive remote protection for active allied protection. It was all to keep them from the Chamber, the enemies of Grant’s faction who were becoming increasingly aggressive recently.

Paul knew far more about the magical world than he felt he should, not only because of what Henry Heindrich had done to him and his memories, but because Thomas had always come to him with his problems and that didn’t change when the rat teleported feet first into the magical world. The number of times Thomas had shown up at his door, or in his room, needing to talk or scream had gone up exponentially.

Paul had days when he wished Thomas would find another best friend to vent on, but those were only when he was stressed with problems of his own, and then, once Thomas had unloaded, he listened to Paul and whatever problems he was having with his thesis.

He searched his best friend’s eyes. “Do you need us to talk in private for a while so you’ll be able to enjoy this?”

Thomas smiled. “I’m good. Things are going our way for once, or so it feels like. There’s just been a lot of jumping around, and while sex will keep my magical batteries filled, the mental drain needs to be dealt with some good times. So how about a dance?”

Paul smirked. “Why don’t you get something to eat from the buffet first? You know the Heeran rule of dancing. The first one is always with my mother.”

He motioned to the DJ as he approached his mother’s table. He bowed to the people seated there. “Eric, Nadia, it’s a pleasure to see you as always. Miss Heeran, may I have the honor of this dance?”

The background song that had been played faded, and a new one started. Paul’s only requirement for it had been instrumental and with the three beats of a waltz. It was a bit basic for Paul’s current tastes, but for the only woman he would ever dance with, he bent to her preference.

She stepped out from behind the table, curtsied to him, then took his arm as he guided her to the dance floor, where they glided together the way they did since the days she taught him the first steps of a waltz.

## Storyboard, 1.5-2

“It’s all good,” Paul said as he wrapped the dishes in older shirts and underwear. “I still have a week or so before I need to be out, I’m sure I’ll have something before then.”

“Yeah, well,” Roland said, from the phone on the counter. “You know there’s space in our bed for you if no one’s been smart enough to hire you by then.”

“Yours, or Madoc’s, or Trevor’s,” Paul replied. “As well as dozens of my friends offering their couch, if it comes to that.”

“Trevor?” Roland said, horrified. “You do know that means Jude’s going to be in that bed, right?” Paul chuckled at the audible shudder. “Why would you want to be in the same bed as my sister?”

“It’s to sleep.”

The rat snorted. “I know you and Trevor fuck, so let’s not lie to each other about what’s going to happen.”

“If Judith is going to be in the bed, only sleep will be happening.”

“Seriously, though. No offers?”

“Biochemistry is a competitive field.” Paul made sure the wrapped dishes were secure before closing the box and setting it to seal. “There are less than a hundred companies in California, maybe five times that in the whole US, that do solid biochem research. You were at the graduation. There were twenty of us from biochemistry related fields getting our doctorate this year, and there aren’t that many research positions open right now.”

“Weren’t you like at the top of your class?”

Paul chuckled and moved the box with the others. “Doctorates don’t work the way bachelors do. Getting it is the exploit in itself, along with everyone else who got it. I’ll get a position, so long as a company finds what I’m focusing on advantageous to what they are doing.”

“Well, if that doesn’t happen, Niel says that he will make it extra worth your while to pick our bed.”

Paul laughed. This was what he got for having so many friends part of a magical group where sex powered the magic. They considered what they could do super special.

Not that Paul could contradict them. Magic added an element to the sex that could make things interesting. There was that offer to have a magical phrase written on him that would turn Paul into an overcharged sex animal.

The theory was interesting, but the implied lack of control over who he ended up having sex with had been a turn off.

“If it comes to it, Rol, tell your boyfriend that I will be in your bed first.” A distant

'yes!' sounded. "And then I can go from bed to bed to couch, until I have a job that lets me afford a place of my own."

"And then we're the first to help you break it in."

Paul snorted. "Good luck doing that before Thomas. The only reason he hasn't offered me his bed is that these days he's never sure where that's going to be."

"Yeah." Roland grew quiet.

"I'm going to disconnect," Paul said. "I need to get most of this prepacking done before the lease is up, otherwise I'll need to call in my friends on the last day to help and it'll turn into an orgy."

"Just tell everyone to bring a stranger; that should keep things quiet."

"I'll take it under advertisement, you two have fun." Paul ended the call and moved on to the next thing that needed to be packed.

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Paul was boxing his collection of dance music when the knock came. He had all of them on his phone, but there was something to the act of taking the memory chip out of its case and inserting it into a player that helped set up the mood.

He glanced at his phone, expecting to have missed the message from the building doorman he'd let someone in, but there was nothing. Maybe one of his friends had entered while he was distracted. It had happened before, but at least then he knew to expect an arrival.

He opened the door, and instead of any one of his friends, a massive tiger stood in the hallway.

"Dietrich?" Paul didn't know what else to say. He hadn't seen or spoken to the tiger since his graduation three days before, and there were no reasons for him to visit. Paul hadn't even known the man knew where he lived, although... Paul looked around for Madoc.

"Paul," the tiger replied, then smiled. "I'm alone; I didn't think I needed a chaperon to visit you."

It was more that getting Madoc away from the tiger was nearly impossible, Paul thought but didn't voice it. The rat loved physically powerful men, and with Dietrich being a near divine embodiment of masculinity, as Madoc often said, he never got enough of him.

"I didn't expect you." Paul moved out of the way. "Come in."

"It's been a few days," Dietrich said. "I thought I'd check in to see how the job search was going." He indicated the boxes along the wall. "Moving?"

"Just packing; the lease is up next week. I'm podding everything until I have a place. I have plenty of offers for places to crash until I can afford my own."

Dietrich nodded. "Having friends is good, when you don't have money." The stop was abrupt. "I'm sorry. That was insensitive."

Paul shrugged. "I've been in San Francisco Bay for years now. That's long enough to have seen the divide between those who have and those who don't."

"It's still no excuse."

Paul watched the tiger walk around the room, looking at first the boxes then the collection of music chips that were yet to be packed, trying to figure him out. He knew what

he was after. Dietrich made no secret he was interested in having sex. Dietrich always wanted to have sex; he was an Orr after all, and the Orrs were followers of the nameless god of gay sex.

But the Orrs were known for being blunt about it. San Francisco Bay was one of the few cities in the US with sex clubs. Clubs where sex was the main reason for them existing, and that was because the Orrs were in charge.

So Dietrich being polite anytime he was around Paul went against everything he heard of his family. Even Madoc had commented on it.

Paul didn't mind it. The man was a lot smarter than people thought, or than he liked people to think. He never acted dumb, but he usually let people think his muscles, or his cock, replaced his brains.

Dietrich took a pack from a box and showed it to Paul. "The Song Bird? Really?" The canine was barely visible on the front of the plastic container for the memory chip.

"It's from his early years, when he was still good. He always had a few songs on his albums with classic rhythm, mixed with more contemporary beats. They made for good pieces to dance to."

The tiger smiled. "Of course. How is your mother?"

"She made it back to Minneapolis in one piece, happy to be back where the weather's more reasonable."

Dietrich tilted an ear in curiosity.

"It's a Minnesota thing."

The tiger smiled and nodded. "And how is the search for employment?"

Paul had thought he'd imagined the forced casualness in the question when Dietrich had asked at his graduation, but heard it here again. "It's still ongoing," he answered cautiously.

"Good, good." He turned his back to Paul. "How do you feel about working for someone you consider a friend?"

"I... don't know that any of my friends own a biochemical firm or work for one that's currently looking for researchers. Is Madoc..." he let the question trail. He was the only friend they had in common, but even working for one of the Orrs, the rat didn't have the kind of finances needed to get a research company off the ground.

"No, Madoc isn't who I mean." Dietrich turned, hands clasped before him. "I would like to offer you a job."

"I—" Paul was stunned. He'd looked into every company that did biochemical research in the Greater Bay Area, since his first choice was to stay here, where most of his friends were, and in none of that had the name of the Orrs come up. "I didn't know your family was involved in biotech."

"You'll find that if you look deep enough, my family is involved in every business in our city to one degree or another. But this isn't one of those. This is... personal. Something for me. Something to advance my goals, independent of my nephews."

"And you want me?" Paul went over everything that had come up in the discussions between him and the tiger. A lot of it had been more personal than academic, the 'getting to

know you' kind of talk. But he couldn't think of one time when what he'd hoped to research had come up. Biochemistry was a wide field. Considering Dietrich's interest, he'd need some kind of insider information to think Paul would be interested. "Did Madoc tell you what I told him?"

It hadn't been in confidence, but Paul had thought his friend knew better than to just talk.

"Madoc is loyal. It's one of his most endearing traits. He is loyal to me, and he is loyal to his friends." Dietrich motioned to Paul. "When I started making the plans for my project, he mentioned where some of your interests lie, and I think you would be good for it."

"My other applications?" he asked, thinking of the stories about the Orrs he'd heard. The extent they'd go to get what they wanted.

The tiger shook his head. "I have not done anything to affect them. If you get an offer, you are welcome to take it. I will, of course, offer you more, but the decision will be yours. Unlike many in my family, I'm more comfortable when taking a direct approach." He paused, then smiled. "Actually, that seems to be a growing trend among us."

"You know that what I want to study isn't entirely conventional."

Dietrich nodded. "My sole interest is my men. Helping them achieve their potential is my gift. With Madoc's power, we are pushing that further. Adding science to magic, I think it is a reasonable extension of what I want."

Helping guys get stronger and bigger had been something driving Paul's interest in biochemistry since discovering those bodybuilding magazines. Finding out about Madoc and magic had only made him more curious about the possibilities and using both to help shape men's bodies.

"I need to think about it."

"Of course." Dietrich stepped forward.

"I mean, I am flattered that you'd want me for a job there, but..." he was an Orr, and the stories were clear about one thing. Nothing offered from an Orr came without strings attached to them.

"I do want you," Dietrich said softly, and the tiger ran a hand along Paul's side, stepping fully into his personal space. He raised a hand before the golden tiger could comment and the remote to the entertainment system was there. Dietrich pressed the button and the Song Bird's crystal and beautifully high pitch voice sounded from the speakers around the room.

He had a second to wonder how such a voice could turn into the rough and off-key thing that had caused the failure of the later albums, and then Dietrich pushed against him, his other hand on his shoulder.

Paul moved reflexively, driven by the underlying rhythm of the song the tiger picked, a tango, as well as how said tiger moved against him. Hand on hip, hand in the now offered hand, Paul followed the lead as Dietrich moved in time to the music. When he looked up he was surprised not to see amusement in the Orr's eyes. Of having won a game, getting what he was after. Paul saw concentration, focus, determination.



When a hand moved under his shirt, Paul didn't protest. They were moving in sync. It wasn't something easy to achieve in a first dance with a partner. It took time and a desire to get to know the person until they moved this well.

Dietrich dipped Paul, and as he pulled him up, the shirt went over his head. The smile on the tiger's muzzle was one of appreciation. A spin and Paul was pressed, back against front, on the tiger and he felt the erection.

Paul knew what the tiger was packing. Dietrich didn't bother with clothing in his gym. No one who went there to train did, because only Dietrich's men were allowed to train there, and they knew what they gained there came with a price.

The hand undid Paul's belt, pulling it out of the loops as he was sent spinning away. He stopped with the abruptness the music demanded and watched as with flourish, Dietrich pulled the tight t-shirt off himself, exposing pecs and abs through the fur.

Paul was hard. Not because of the beautiful, hot, hard body before him, but because of the ease and familiarity in Dietrich's motion as he came back, took him into his arms and continued with the dance.

Then Paul's pants were undone, and as Dietrich lifted him they fell off. Then went the underwear; one quick motion, hand under them, on his ass and down before gravity pulled Paul back.

Dietrich looked him up and down as they moved away without letting go and nodded. Paul didn't have to say anything. His body said they had reached that stage where what Dietrich wanted would happen. The tiger undid his pants with one hand and stepped out of his shoes and then without breaking stride. Then the two naked bodies were pressed together, no longer dancing to the song that was coming to an end.

The kiss was forceful. It was the kiss of an Orr, the Orr of the stories Paul had heard about. Dietrich was taking, but unlike those stories, Paul was willingly giving. He kissed back, tongue moving against the tiger's.

Paul's back hit the wall and Dietrich brought his hand between them, before letting it go. Paul took hold of the large, thick shaft and moaned. It was part acting and part true appreciation. Dietrich liked being worshiped, and Paul didn't mind giving him some of what he wanted.

He continued stroking the cock as they broke the kiss, panting. Dietrich licked his lips. Paul ran his other hand over the man's chest, feeling the muscles under the fur. It didn't matter to Paul that magic was involved, they were there. They were real.

"You don't have to," Dietrich said, and that told Paul the man had listened, actually gotten to know him. Paul wasn't a worshiper, and Dietrich wasn't demanding that of him.

"I like what I'm feeling," Paul replied, squeezing the cock.

"Do you want to feel more of it?"

"Lube's already packed." He didn't say it with any kind of disappointment. Paul had listened to what Dietrich said too, had watched him at his gym.

"My jeans," the tiger said.

They stepped together without letting go until they reached them, and with a kick they were in the air then in the tiger's hands. Paul pulled the large packet out of the pocket,

ripped it open with his teeth, then poured it on the cock.

Dietrich growled, "How do you want me to take you?"

Paul smiled. "I could do with a show of strength."

The smile stretched slowly on the tiger's muzzle, eventually exposing teeth. The hands squeezed Paul's ass, then his feet were off the ground and wrapped around the larger tiger's waist. Dietrich didn't move to the wall for extra support. He held Paul, ass cheeks spread apart, poised over the hard cock.

Paul wasn't light. He wasn't a wall of muscle like the man holding him. All it took was for him to wear pants and a shirt and with the fur as padding, he looked utterly ordinary. His muscles were lean, but dense. His weight surprised his physician, considering how little fat Paul had on his body.

He positioned the cock, stroking it to make sure it was well lubed. "Take it slow," he told the tiger. A test, more than a worry. One might lead the dance, but they still needed to listen to their partner.

Dietrich lowered him, and Paul moaned as the cock tip stretched his hole, letting go of the cock and placing both arms around the tiger's neck. He looked in those deep green half lidded eyes as he shuddered from more of the cock entering him.

Dietrich paused, raised Paul until the cock was out, with only the tip of the head touching the ring. He smiled and held him there without any indication of straining.

Paul nodded in appreciation, then he was moving down again. This time, the cock didn't stop until it was entirely in and then the tiger was lifting him and moving him down.

Paul appreciated the show of strength and control, but realized one problem with this. He looked Dietrich in the eyes. "How about you put me down so you can really fuck me?"

Dietrich smirked. "Why do you think I need to put you down for that?"

"Physics."

The tiger laughed. "Physics can go fuck itself." He turned and carried Paul to the small kitchen, each step making the cock move in and out and Paul moan. Then his ass was on the edge of the table.

Before he could point out that this counted as being put down, Dietrich was pounding his ass hard enough Paul was screaming his pleasure. Then the table was sliding until it hit the counter and something broke.

Paul whined from his cock being rubbed between their stomach and the pounding his prostate was taking. He loved that moment, when he had no idea if the sensations would be enough to make him cum, or if he'd have to give himself a hand.

"Do you," Dietrich growled. "Want my gift?"

Paul shook his head. He knew the honor that was. Dietrich was particular about the men he gifted with a fraction of his muscle, but Paul liked the way he looked.

Dietrich buried himself in Paul's ass with a scream that had to get through the apartment's soundproofing and came. Paul held on to him as the cock pulsed inside him.

Dietrich panted, head bowed, forehead against Paul's. "You didn't cum."

"Disappointed?" Paul asked.

“Not every guy’s wired that way.” Dietrich straightened and pulled Paul’s hand away from his neck. Instead of taking the hand and putting it on Paul’s cock, so he could finish himself, Dietrich rubbed the palms, spreading the lube to his hand, then wrapped it around Paul’s cock.

“Oh fuck,” the golden tiger hissed as Dietrich stroked him.

“You like to come while being fucked?”

“Who doesn’t?” Paul replied with a chuckle. Then, to his surprise, Dietrich was thrusting in him again. “Still hard?” Dietrich always seemed to be hard at the gym, but he’d just cum.

“I’m an Orr. Fucking is what I was made for. Yes, I am still hard.” And as if doubting him had been something deserving of a form of punishment, Dietrich fucked him hard again.

“Right, god of fucking and all that.” Paul held on as his orgasm built, burying his head in the tiger’s shoulder to muffle the scream, his body shuddering and his cock becoming sensitive.

Dietrich licked his palm before offering it to Paul, who licked his cum off it. Then the tiger lifted him off the table. “I think I need to show you that an Orr is so much better than those Society friends of yours.”

Paul swallowed. That had sounded a lot like a threat. Then the cock bounced in his ass as the tiger walked toward the bedroom and decided he could take this kind of threat.

## Storyboard, 1.5-3

Paul grunted as he tightened the strap holding the mattress in front of everything else in the pod, eliciting a chuckle from the man he'd been talking with through the earpiece.

"If you have to work that hard at it," Trevor said, "might be time to invest in laxatives."

"How does the response to that go again? Right. Hard de har har. Just for that, I might drop you a few pegs in the order of which bed I sleep in." He closed the door, latched it close, then engaged the electronic lock on it, setting the pin.

"I'll suck you off if you keep me at the top of the list."

"So will everyone else on the list. Well, those offering beds. None of the couch offers come with sex, which is fine since I didn't get to know a lot of guys at the school that well."

"There was a Sigma Theta Gamma frat you could have gone to."

Paul snorted. "With all due respect to that brotherhood, after Henry, I had no interest in any of those frats." His phone buzzed and the pod shipper's app told him the request had been received and a drone would be picking it up within the hour. Then they listed extra services they offered, for only a few more bucks.

"They aren't- yeah, nevermind. Anyway, it's not like you need a frat anymore. You're on the job market now."

Paul smiled, putting the phone away. It was so nice of his friend not to say that having connections through a frat could have helped him get work. If that had been feasible, the Society frat wouldn't have been the one he'd have gone for. But once he knew magic was real and how it affected what he planned on researching, none of the biotech frats made sense.

"Speaking of job..."

"You got one!" Trevor waited for a beat. "You're still crashing in mine and Judith's bed tonight, right?"

"That drop is getting a lot more likely. Niel's promise that my stay in his and Roland's bed will be extra special is sounding more appealing. But... maybe. I haven't said yes yet." He waved to the guard on his way to the elevator. Trevor waited.

Alone, inside the car, Paul sighed. "Dietrich Orr made me a job offer."

"Dietrich... exactly what kind of job are we talking about here?"

"Biotech."

"Yeah, I'm going to need a little more. It's Dietrich. He might mean the plumbing between his legs going into the plumbing under your tail."

Paul shook his head in amusement and irritation. This was what the tiger got for

making sure no one realized he had a brain under those ears. “Actual biotech. He’s aware I want to study how magic can interact with the nutrient composition in the creation of a muscle-building additive. He feels it’s in line with his gym-”

“Club,” Trevor corrected. “The Orrs consider the places where they get to pursue their sexual desires clubs.”

“Gym,” Paul repeated. “They actually work out there.”

“More of a side effect of Dietrich being only interested in men who can look like him.”

“Bullshit. That’s just the stories. Have you actually met him? Spoken with him? Yes, he likes them big. But he has sex with smaller guys.” He stopped himself from mentioning that he and the tiger had done it a few days ago, multiple times. Unlike the guys in the Society, Paul considered his sex life private. “Honestly, any guy willing to worship his body has a good chance of getting fucked by him.”

Trevor was quite for a while, which told Paul he’d inadvertently hit a nerve. Knowing the rat, probably one about not properly getting to know someone he might have to interact with, eventually. Trevor was big on learning everything he could about everything and everyone around him.

“Still, he’s an Orr.”

“Which is why I’m mentioning this to you. You work for one of them. Do you think it’s a good idea?”

“I work for the security firm one of them owns. It’s not the same. It sounds like you’ll be directly under him. And yes, the pun is intended. He’s an Orr. You don’t work for one of them that close and not end up with their cock in you.”

“I’m aware of that. If I tell you it’s a personal project of his instead of a family-related one, what would you tell me?”

“Run comes to mind.”

“I’m not the running kind, Trevor. I might cha cha or foxtrot my way out of there, but running’s a little desperate.”

“Did he swear you to secrecy?”

“I wouldn’t be talking to you if he had.” He entered his apartment and grabbed the garbage bag off the table.

“Then I’m going to arrange for you to have a meeting with one of the others. One of the Orrs who are actually in charge. The last thing you want to do is get mixed up with one of them and find out they’re using you as a weapon against the rest of their family. And before you tell me Dietrich isn’t like that, he’s from the generation that gave them the Orr twins.”

“I’ll point out I’m not up to date on the Orr history, but I do trust you; if you say I should talk with one of them, I will.”

“Okay, good. I’ll talk to my boss’s assistant. He’ll know which of the Orrs I should get you to talk with. Anyway, independent of that, we are expecting you for dinner. Judith is cooking Nadia’s famous Spagzagna.”

“I’ll be there. I’m not missing any of Nadia’s cooking, even if it is through the

intermediary of her daughter.” He disconnected and spent the rest of the afternoon disposing of what was left in the apartment and cleaning it. Then he locked up and went to the front desk to sign his release form, remove his phone from the locking programs, and hand over the physical keys.

Finally, after all that, he was able to get in his car to head to Trevor and Judith’s for a well-earned meal.

#####

Paul looked at the clock at the bottom of the windshield. Ten minutes since the last time he’d looked, and he’d barely traveled a tenth of a mile. Which, considering the usual San Francisco Bay traffic, was about right. He was happy he’d given himself plenty of time to get there.

He drank from the travel mug as he accessed the routing app and the windshield showed nearly fifteen miles of red road. He tapped it, then put the mug back in the holder.

“Fires throughout the city have brought traffic to a standstill as emergency services struggle to deal with them. As of the last report, a server farm, a hotel, clubs, as well as houses in Eastmont Hills were some of the-”

“Elaborate on the Eastmont Hills fires,” he instructed. Madoc lived in Eastmont Hills.

Three addresses appeared as the voice muted. Madoc’s address and the two next to it. A text showed up with them. An article about it, posted only ten minutes before. The fires were under control. The current theory from the firefighters on the site was an electrical overload, causing the junction boxes in each of the houses to catch on fire. No reported casualties, two minor injuries.

It didn’t say who had been injured. Madoc’s kids would still be at school. But Madoc? He spent a lot of time at the Gym, but his schedule was flexible. He could have been home. Would he still be injured, though? The rat had magic, after all. Still, he could make sure.

“Don’t bother,” a woman said from the car’s speakers as Paul called up the phone app. “He’s fine.”

Instead of his contact list appearing, as he’d set the app to do, the face of a pangolin appeared. “Who?” he asked in surprise before wondering how he could have a facecall now since cars were programmed to prevent them. And that gave him the answer.

Thomas’s hacker friend with magic powers. What was her name?

“Shila, right?”

“Yeah, I-”

“How do you know who I was about to call?”

“I’m in your phone,” she said, sounding annoyed. “I can see the articles you were just reading, and Madoc’s home burning down is also burning bridges. He’s at the Orr’s club-”

“Gym,” Paul corrected.

“Whatever. Anyway, I’m calling because I need a ride.”

“There are a dozen apps for those. Plus, don’t you have a deal with Thomas?”

“Compromised. Reason why Madoc’s house is burning? The Chamber is wrecking all the arrival points Thomas has within the city limits.”

“Wait, those fuckers are after-” The Chamber were after Grant’s faction, and Thomas learned of Shila through Grant. Guess it was silly of him not to assume this miracle hacker Shila was a Practitioner. “Unless you’re nearby and don’t mind waiting in gridlocked traffic, a taxi might still be faster.”

“I’ll guide you. Half the gridlock’s their doing, the other’s mine, so that map of yours is only as accurate as I want it to be. You’re ten meters from a road on your right. There’s about to be movement. You take it.”

Before Paul could ask anything else, the car in front of him pulled ahead, stopping not long after that, but leaving him just enough space to squeeze into the turn. Then, even with the routing app telling him every road he was on was at a standstill, he never had to slow as she guided him.

#####

The pangolin jumped into the car before it was completely still, and Paul stared at her. She had a gray bathrobe over a pink jogging suit.

“Did the Chamber catch you on laundry day?”

“Funny,” she said dryly. “Drive.”

“Where to?” He pulled off the curb.

“Out of the city.”

He looked at her. “I’m going to need some elaboration.”

She did something on her phone, and a route appeared on the windshield.

Paul started driving, but he wasn’t done. “OK, good. Now that we’re moving, any particular reason I’m your plan B?”

“More like plan semicolon,” Shila muttered before breaking into rant mode. “The Chamber found me. I don’t have a fucking clue how they did it, but they found me, and burned every bridge I have, so I had to resort to escape plans I didn’t even know I had so they couldn’t have done anything to them.” She motioned to him. “Thomas mentioned his best friend was doing his doctorate in Cisco a couple of years ago. He also said you’d only just changed cars from the one you’d been given when you started driving. For some reason that was what I remembered after feeling my burning building.”

Paul frowned, both due to an inconsistency and because of motion in his rearview mirror. “We’re a little bit away from Eastmont-”

“This is a literal information war at the moment; that’s how they’re trying to bait me into fighting them head on,” Shila said, before smiling slightly. “Silver lining, they weren’t expecting my apartment or the server farms to go up in flames. That was my ward talismans overclocking themselves when they started their attack. But yeah, I’m- by which I mean we’re- getting out of this by doing what they don’t expect.”

“Then we’re going to have to think even more sideways because I think we’re being tailed,” Paul said as he continued to watch the car in his rear view mirror match them turn for turn.

The string of curses that came out of Shila’s mouth as she worked on her phone made Paul’s ears burn. The route on the windshield changed.

“Drive faster. Someone already got to the automated speeding scanners. You don’t

have to worry about them.”

“Not what I’m worried about,” he said as he drove around the slower moving cars. “Unless you have a way to make sure there are no cars on any of these routes, they are what’s going to limit my speed.” He accelerated once he had the room. The two cars in the chase didn’t bother hiding what they were doing anymore.

“I can’t do that kind of magic,” she replied. “It’s Cisco, be happy I was able to trick a lot of them into being stuck on different roads.”

Paul made the turn as fast as he was comfortable, then cursed as the car skidded and he noticed the travel mug thrown out of the holder by the centrifugal forces. He caught it, slammed it back in, and got the car under control, straightening it.

Noticing the look the pangolin gave him afterwards, he said, “It’s good coffee. I’m not having it spilt.”

The two cars further back, having taken the turn at a safer speed and probably hadn’t had to worry about nearly losing their coffee. It gave him the confidence to look at the map and see the long straight line over the river.

“Is the Golden Gate Bridge a good idea? That’s a long stretch with no way to get off it.”

“Best way out of here,” she replied. “With the gridlock, it’s nearly deserted going out.”

The cars behind him were catching up.

“Can’t this thing go any faster?” Shila asked after looking over her shoulder.

“Not if we want to stay on the road. My aggressive driving course was limited to ‘let someone else do it’.” He weaved through the light traffic, then sped up instead of slowing down at the approaching light, fighting not to close his eyes as he flew through it and honking trailed behind him. One of the cars had to stop because of the chaos he’d caused, but the other made it through with only a slight impact and not much in the loss of speed.

Luck, Paul decided. At least he wasn’t the only one lacking in the race car driving department. His main worry now was that he’d see a gun aimed at the car each time he looked in the rearview mirror. He wasn’t sure what he could do against bullets.

Once on the bridge, Paul put the accelerator down. The second car had rejoined the chase, and he had to hope his engine was more powerful than theirs. And it looked to be, as the distance increased. He smiled and looked ahead. As Shila said, the bridge in this direction was pretty much deserted... except for those three cars driving towards them.

“Shila. This is going to be a problem.”

She looked up, cursed again and Paul’s ears burned, then was back to working on her phone. “When I tell you, make a hard right and floor it.”

“There’s nothing there, Shila. We’re on a bridge.”

“Trust me.”

Paul took a breath. Thomas trusted her, and she’d saved his best friend’s life a few times. She was magic, and he wasn’t. She could do things that defied the laws of physics, even if he hadn’t had the chance to see her, specifically, do any yet.

So when she gave the word, Paul turned as hard as the car let him and slammed his



foot down. Then the car smashed through the rails and careened into the air.

Paul saw the travel mug lift out of the holder as they started falling at the speed of gravity and placed a hand on it to hold it in place.

# Storyboard, 1.5-4

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 electric 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 shook 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 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 a 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 raising. Paul put a hand on hers as they 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 on 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 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, placed 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 sounding 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.

#####

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 a 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, she 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 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 she had her in a safe place and see about working out a way to pay them back for this.

#####

They were driving through San Rafeal when Paul had enough of the silence. She'd stopped working on her phone by the time they passed the exit to the one thirty-one and had been just started 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’er going.”

“Can this thing make it to Alaska?”

He glanced at the charge readout, three quarters so about 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 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. We don’t have an arrangement where I drop everything going on and help you when you ask. 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 take the wheel 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 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 still had what he considered a normal life. What he sw 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. From 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 as she could. Having something concrete to do helps people not panic. Gives 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 on the west coast.

“I just have my phone. It’s more powerful than you’d think but the Chamber 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 aid?”

“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 quite. “Maybe I can program a precognition talisman...” she looked at her phone. “I need more, but not just power... Google’s not too far, if I get near I can get into their quantum machine. I’m going to need something like that 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 of the thread is a little smaller.”

The word lost stuck in Paul’s brain, something, no, someone. Whoever it was was

just dancing at the edge of his brain, so it wasn't someone he knew deeply... someone he met through Thomas, but not the frat... not anyone Society. That left Grant and-

“He moved back to Denver.”

She looked at him uncomprehendingly.

“Donal, the Practitioner who fixed all our memories after Henry had his way with us.” Seriously, this was like having trouble remembering the doctor who cured you of cancer. “His staff is all about finding stuff that's been lost. He eventually wanted to go back to Denver, so rather than letting him be homeless again Thomas got him a house.”

Her expression brightened. “Yes, I know who you mean. If one Practitioner could do it, it's be him.”

“So, Denver?”

She smiled. “Denver.”



# Storyboard, 1.5-5

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, there wasn't much in the way of conversation outside of maybe comparing whose life was more wrecked by this. I mean, Paul lost a car and one dinner plans... Shila's entire life was turned upside down.

There had also been no complaint added when on top of stealing a car, Shila hacked one of the rare cash machines, possibly the only one in Santa Rosa, so they'd have money to pay for a motel room. That the clerk hadn't even flicked 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 need 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 nightlife, 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 of 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 translation 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 asked as he handed her one of the burgers and a selection of condiment packets. When they arrived she hadn’t looked in a state to question what she wanted to eat, but he’d had a burger at the drive through earlier in the day 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, remote viewing, and whatever far-something someone might be able to cobble together short of 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 out on the other bed.

“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 has 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 I’m OK.”

“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 of the 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 mattered. 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 mom's in that list."

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

"About how magic has impacted me and my life, not a detailed breakdown of everything I know about magic," Paul said. "Meaning she has no clue who you are."

Between Henry messing with his memories and all that was happening to the Hertz, the only way to keep his mother in the dark would have been to alter her memories. It was suggested, but not recommended. Not that Paul would have allowed it.

So she was told Paul's condition of having not just his real memories but a bunch of fake one, and that he would have a bit of trouble picking between the two for a bit. Paul was fortunate that Henry didn't pay much attention to him until late in the whole ordeal. He'd gone extreme on Paul when he did, but he only had five different sets of memories instead of the dozens or in some cases hundreds some of the others had to work through.

In the end his mother didn't want to know more, as knowing this had happened was enough to leave her worried of what else was out there that could hurt him. Thankfully not enough to make him stay in Minneapolis for his studies, though she did try to argue for something closer than San Francisco; on the surface it was a great city, but even ignoring magic the rumors crept in for those looking.

Still didn't change the fact San Francisco University had one of the best Biotech courses short of going to the big names.

"She'll ask one of the others," Paul eventually concluded out loud, both to assure Shila and himself. And she likely would; his mother was still in contact with Eric and Nadia, and they'd know to contact Thomas... she'd be told what was up.

Whether that would convince her everything was fine or not was another question. He wasn't the target, but he was literally right next to her. They'd have to convince her he was fine. Otherwise she was going to freak out.

#####

Paul rushed out of the bathroom, having heard 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 at him, eyes wide. Instead of saying anything, she swiped towards the screen on the wall and it came on with a news segment.

"As of two hours ago," a fox in a suit seated behind a desk said somberly, "A state of emergency has been declared for the city of Denver. A quarantine has been imposed. Information is still difficult to obtain, but we have Jennifer standing by in Parker, where the Military has 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, 1.5-6

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 while Paul wanted to be more generous, one thing history class had shown 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'd expected people to try and break in 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 recognition 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,” Shilas ordered. “We need to leave, drive now!”

Paul drove towards 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 limits 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 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 town. They might as well get that done while they worked out their next move.

She showed him her phone. On it was a calico cat 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’s the vaunted know-it-all when it comes 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 her mouth, then closed it, looking outside. “Merlin.”

“I’m going to guess that’s a different one than 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... what you could call breakers in place. They blew the servers before I could reach my limit, which also threw what they were doing in shambles long enough I could get out, call you, and we could run.”

Paul nodded. “Okay, so the way I’m seeing this, the Chamber cuts you off from anyone who could help you, then stresses you until you die.”

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

Paul nodded. “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 way you can be safe,” he said, starting the car. “Is by increasing the number of allies. We get to Donal. He’s 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.”



# Storyboard, 1.5-7

Paul listened to Shila's complaints while watching their surroundings. She'd crafted a talisman out of code and put that on his phone too, so they should have been able to waltz into Denver with no more effort on their part. Instead, there had been three near encounters with National Guard soldiers with only how much else was going on around them keeping the two of them from getting arrested.

Then, as they crossed through the crowds at the edge looking for a way to leave, or hoping for treatment, food, or water, there were two attempted muggings. People were desperate and while in some places that led them to banding together for support, in others, it shattered any sense of civility. A mix of running and Paul getting in a lucky punch had allowed them to leave that layer for one deeper.

Here, the roads were deserted; the people stayed indoors and waiting, or leaving only for urgencies. Paul saw some of them at the windows, and he saw the shotguns and rifles, usually as they approached as a warning for them to keep their distance.

With less to do to avoid altercations, Shila had had more time to complain and explain how it could be that her talisman wasn't working as well as it should. She put the blame squarely on the Chamber. Their presence had to mean they'd have someone in place that could interfere with her magic.

The way she explained it, the talisman didn't render them invisible. She'd need access to a few server farms for something that could bend the laws of physics to that level. They were invisible to cameras and any digital recorders. Those were well within what she could do, but people needed more. So she'd programmed more of a 'don't look here' kind of magic.

The problem, as Paul saw it, was that something like that had to only be as good as the level of attention people were willing to put into looking. On a normal day, he had no doubt it would be fine. People tended to be too wrapped up in their own lives. He guessed that even a police officer wouldn't pay attention to them unless they tried to get his attention.

But this wasn't a normal day. The National Guard was actively looking for anyone breaking quarantine. And that meant in both directions. So they were more attentive. Then

the people who could cause them troubles were looking for any opportunity to get a leg up on the situation. And those weren't worried about hurting them unless they could be hurt in return, it turned out.

Paul's fist still hurt, but at least it had paid off.

His primary concern was catching this sickness, even if Shila was confident they were safe. She'd put an antiviral talsimin on his phone, and so long as he didn't lose that, he'd be fine. When he'd asked for some details, she'd looked at him and said, "Magic."

Knowing magic was real didn't make that, as an answer, any more comforting than it would have been without the knowledge.

According to the news report, further in, there was chaos again. The hospitals were swarmed by sick people and those believing they were sick and those looking to take advantage of all groups, but they wouldn't be going to any of those places.

"A car?" Paul asked, as they approached an abandoned one with the passenger door opened. "We can get there faster."

She shrugged. "The talsimain's still on your phone, so you can get it started."

The problem proved to be the lack of a charge.

"Can that be part of what the Chamber's doing?" Paul asked after the fourth abandoned car without a charge.

"Depends on what they're after. Preventing people from leaving will increase the strain on Merlin, but they have the National Guard for that. These people were probably just careless."

Paul nodded. Not everyone was lucky to have their garage equipped with wireless charging, and plugging the car in was a step even the most attentive driver could forget. It had happened to Paul a few times back in Minneapolis. His mother's garage only had one plug for both their cars. The apartment building by the university had come with wireless charging.

So they continued on foot.

#####

Finding Donal's house took a little longer than Paul expected. What he hadn't realized was that it wouldn't be under Thomas's name. His friend had complained loudly about Donal's inability to stay put after the event that had brought the two of them together. So he'd gotten him a house when the squirrel returned to Denver.

He also didn't know Donal's last name.

Shila had finally found it, Hines, and with that locating the house had been easy, and the walk uneventful. Getting in was... proving to be more difficult.

Donal wasn't in, and neither of them wanted to stay outside while they waited. The weather shouldn't be too cold even in Denver once the sun set, but there was no telling who would be about once darkness offered cover.

Shila was on her phone again after unlocking the digital lock and the door still refused to open. She muttered something about how the place had more talisman security than her place, but she'd countered those, so she couldn't figure out what was keeping her from going in.

Paul walked around the house, and since she'd said all security, magical or otherwise, had been turned off he used a crowbar he found in the backyard to pry a window open. Inside, Paul navigated around bins of stuff to get out of what had to have been a guest room. There were more bins in the hall, and the living room was set up as a workspace, with a bench and tools. If the place had belonged to anyone other than a Practitioner, Paul would have called the owner a hoarder.

He flipped the deadbolt open and let Shila inside.

She glared at the purely mechanical lock, then looked at the bins around the workbench. "How does he find anything?" she mused.

"His thing's lost stuff," Paul replied, looking over the workbench. "So I'm guessing it's just there when he needs it." Bent nails, envelopes that looked to have been stepped on, a bottle of glue that hadn't been dried properly.

"Not how it works," she said.

"Any idea what he was working on? And are we going to stay here until he comes back?"

"I don't do physical, so I can't tell you what concepts he might have been constructing around." She headed in deeper. "And we might have to wait, but I'd rather find

something in here telling us where he went.”

Paul followed her to the kitchen. “Can’t you program something to find him?”

“You’re asking me to find someone whose staff deals with lost stuff? Think that one through for a minute.”

“Alright, so he’s someone who can’t be found unless he wants to. According to Thomas, Donal does a lot of work with the homeless. Do you think one of the shelters would know where to find him?”

She looked through the cabinets, and Paul only saw more boxes of stuff in there. The fridge was empty.

“You sure he lives here?” Shila asked.

“The house is his,” Paul replied. “What he does with it, I have no idea.” The bedroom was small, and unlike the other spaces, free of random junk. “He occasionally sleeps here, at least.” The attached bathroom was likewise spotless.

The pangolin stood in the bedroom’s doorway, pensive. “I didn’t believe Grant when he told me he’d found someone who’d crafted a staff on his own. We’re supposed to be a once in a century occurrence.” She looked in the hall. “Seeing this, though...”

“That’s just statistics. And how well are those kept in the magical community? Especially one as loosely organized as the Practitioners?”

“Not going to take a dig at someone like Donal bursting my bubble of specialness?” the humor felt forced, especially since Paul hadn’t heard Shila utter one funny thing in the few days he’d known her.

“Won’t help anything, and by how you look, you’re doing enough of a job of that without me.” He paused, considering his next words. “Is the idea that there’s someone else out there who discovered magic without help hitting you that hard?”

“It shouldn’t,” she replied. “Never thought about it before Grant told me.” She forced a shrug. “And we have more important things to do. Like find this guy,” she offered Paul pamphlets. “And you might be right about shelters. Those were under a box on the counter.”

They were for shelters, and had been attached to posts with tape or staples. He wasn’t familiar with Denver, so he didn’t know how close together the addresses were, but the

dates around the circled names were for the day the epidemic started.

“Is there a way he could find out what the chamber was planning?” Paul asked.

“No idea. Normally I’d say he’d have to be looking for it, but with him, I’m not sure if something would just end up in his lap. The dates could just be the days he was planning on going, and he hasn’t had the chance to make plans once problems started.”

“So, are we starting with those and hoping-”

Someone knocked on the door. It was only loud enough to be noticed.

“Mister Hines?” a woman called. “Mister Hines, I was told you could help me.”

Shila caught his arm as Paul walked around her. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Going to open the door. She sounds scared.”

She rolled her eyes. “Looters.”

“Looters don’t knock or announce why they’re here.”

The woman called again.

“Are you really going to leave her out there?” Paul asked, and the look the pangolin gave him was answer enough. He pulled his arm out of her hand and went to the door. He checked the peephole and a white hare in a pale blue dress stood there, looking around nervously. She had something in her arms, but it was too low for Paul to make it out.

He opened the door, and she took a step back, startled, and brought the cane up between them. Then, as if realizing Paul meant her no harm, lowered it. It was metal, he noticed, before she asked, confused.

“Mister Hines?” she asked.

Paul shook his head. “We’re... friends of his. He’s out right now.” For an instant, he didn’t think she’d believe him. But then she nodded. That was good because Paul had no idea how he’d explain what he and Shila were doing in the house if pressed. “Come on in. Maybe we can help you instead?”

“We?” the hare asked as Paul stepped out of the way.

“Me and my friend, we’re-”

“What are you doing with Merlin’s staff?” Shila demanded, phone out, and a look that made it clear that if she didn’t like the answer there was going to be trouble.

Paul looked at the metal cane, and now he noticed it was made of scalpels carefully welded together so that it could be used as a cane, while the edges still looked sharp enough to cut.

Okay, even if Shila hadn’t said it, it was unusual enough that Paul would have wondered if it was a staff now.

# Storyboard, 1.5-8

The hare burst into tears and Paul glared at Shila.

“I’m sorry,” the hare said between sobs. “It’s just been so bad.”

Shila didn’t change her expression, but she put away her phone, so Paul guided the hare to a seat without any boxes on it. “Can you get her some water?”

The pangolin looked ready to argue, but with an annoyed shake of the head vanished deeper into the house.

“I’m sorry,” the hare repeated, clutching the cane to herself. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

“You know Donal?”

She shook her head. “I worked for Doctor Merlin as his nurse. He was a good man. He did a lot of charity, and in the last few years, we’ve been hearing that if someone is in trouble who can’t go to the police, Mister Hines will help them out. And I can’t go to anyone.” She started crying again.

“Why’s that?” Shila asked, offering the hare a glass of water. “And what’s your name?”

The hare dried her tears with the back of her sleeve. “I’m so sorry, that’s unforgivable. Thank you.” She took the glass and sipped. “My name’s Nina Haldi. I’ve worked for Doctor Merline for six years now.” Her smile was sad. “He found me out of nursing school. We got along so well. If I’d been older, I would have asked him on a date.”

Paul looked at Shila.

The pangolin shrugged. “I think he’s in his seventies now.

“Was,” Nina said softly.

“I’m sorry,” Paul said, squeezing her arm.

“What happened?” Shila asked, her tone softening.

“I don’t know.” Nina looked at them, lost. “The doctor was throwing himself into helping the sick, but nothing seemed to help. For everyone who got better, half a dozen were getting sicker. He kept talking about compatibility, virulence, propagation. I mean, those are things about contagion, but it was how he talked about it when he thought he was alone like the words themselves were supposed to do something. I thought-” She swallowed. “I thought the strain was getting to him. I tried to get him to take breaks, but he said he had to stop this. Like it was his calling.” Another sad smile. “He cared so much.”

She ran a hand along the shaft of the cane and Paul worried she’d cut herself, but the cane didn’t draw blood.

“Then what?” Shila asked softly.

Nina looked up, eyes wide. “Then I thought I was the one who was crazy. There was this boy, that was on the third day I think. A caracal with the sweetest smile, despite how sick he was. Seeing him like that just about broke my heart. And I think it broke something in Doctor Merlin, because he fought so hard for that boy. Then, then he got better and we thought that finally, we’d have some good news. Just one would have made such a difference.”

“But just as we thought he was over it, whatever this sickness is, it latched onto him and pulled him down hard. I mean it was like that thing knew how hopeful we were and it just wanted to screw with us.” She spat the last words, her anger overcoming her sadness. “But Doctor Merlin wasn’t going to let it win. He fought it, he... did something, I have no idea what. He had his cane on the boy. He was always with his cane during those days. Then he looked at me. He said to take care of them and... and then he was gone.”

She drank hurriedly. “I thought I’d just blanked under the stress, it had been a lot in only a few days, but his cane was still on the boy. He would never have left without it,” she said, adamant. “And... and his clothes were pooled on the floor, just where he’d been standing.”

“The boy?” Paul asked.

She beamed. “He was cured. It was like he’d never been infected. It baffled the other doctors, but other than taking blood from the boy for the CDC, there were too many other patients.”



“When was that?” Shila asked, looking shell-shocked.

Nina shrugged and thought back, “I don’t know. A few days ago.”

The pangolin stood and headed to the back.

“Shila?” Paul called.

“I’m going to look to see if Hines has something harder than water anywhere in this mess of a house.”

“A few days ago is when we first heard about this on the news,” Paul said. “Are you saying it’s been bad for a lot longer than that?”

“I don’t know how bad it’s been elsewhere in the city. I hadn’t had time to listen to the news. If the doctor’s clinic wasn’t at the epicenter of this, we were damned close. The first patient showed up three weeks ago, Doctor Ellington thought they were a lost cause, but Doctor Merline cured them.” She frowned. “Or we thought he had. We didn’t know what we were dealing with then, so when her vitals improved after a few hours under the doctor’s care and she felt better, we thought it was just a passing bug.”

“It was maybe a week after that,” she continued, “One of the doctors at the clinic called the CDC. She wasn’t the first to call, we just didn’t know about it. They were keeping it quiet. I guess that by the time you heard about it, it was just too bad for them to be able to keep it from the news.”

Shila returned and offered a bottle of beer to Paul and Nina. Paul took it, but the hare shook her head.

“You’d think a guy with all this junk would have something stronger than beer somewhere in there,” the pangolin grumbled as she dropped in a chair. “You’ve held onto the s- cane since then?”

Nina shook her head. “Before I could take it and... I don’t know, I guess I would have tried to find out if Doctor Merlin had family so they could have it. But before I could, Doctor Ellington took it and she started walking with it. So that Merlin would continue working alongside us, she said...”

Shila leaned forward when the hare stalled. “What?”

“She started acting strangely after that. Nothing big, and I guess we all just thought it was the stress. I mean, I don’t think any of us had even processed what it meant that Doctor Merlin’s clothing was just pooled where he’d been. So the rest of us cracking wouldn’t be too much of a stretch.” She bit her lower lip.

“However strange it sounds,” Paul said in as reassuring of a tone as he could manage, “You can say it. We know something about how strange the world can be at times.” That Shila didn’t glare at him for basically stating they knew about magic told him how affected by this news she was.

“She started muttering, but not to herself. It was like she was holding a conversation with someone who wasn’t there.” She hesitated. “I swear, that once, she called this invisible person Merlin.”

Shila’s head snapped up. “What happened after that?”

Nina shrugged. “The next morning, that night had been especially hard on all of us. The next morning someone said Ellington had just left. Just walked out in the middle of the night. No one saw her do that, but she was just gone, so...” she looked at the cane as she trailed off. “Doctor Oliaster took to carrying Doctor Merlin’s cane too. And even faster than Ellington, he was muttering. When he disappeared, there were three of us there in the patient’s room. He was so out of it that to me it looked like he was doing a laying on hands, only using the cane and then he was just gone and I saw- I swear, I saw his clothing fall to the ground as if he’d just been erased.”

She caressed the cane. “I know Doctor Merlin would have understood that his cane was the only thing the events had in common, so we put it in his locker and closed it. We were still too busy dealing with the epidemic for the impossibility of him just vanishing before our eyes to sink in. I think I started keeping myself from stopping just so I wouldn’t have to think about it.”

She eyed the bottle on the coffee table and Paul reached for it, but Nina shook her head.

“People continued vanishing, and without the cane, we just thought they left because they couldn’t take it anymore. I thought about leaving, but Doctor Merlin hadn’t, so I stayed. I noticed that his locker was being tampered with; the lock on it wasn’t closed fully, then I caught one of the new nurses taking it out. I tried to stop her, but she told me that she heard it call to her. That with it, she could fix this that...” she swallowed. “The others before her had worked it out. When I caught up to her she was already vanishing.” She looked at them. “That’s when I took the cane. Those who we’d thought had left, they’d used it and it had... I don’t know what happened.”

She looked at the cane, still running her fingers on it.

“Aren’t you worried that what happened to them will happen to you?” Paul asked, wondering if he should take it away from her.

“I don’t hear any voices,” Nina said, then smiled sweetly. “And Doctor Merlin wouldn’t let something like that happen to me.”

Paul looked at Shila hoping she’d weigh in. She was the expert here. All he had was the stuff he’d pieced together from Thomas’s ranting, and then his stories of what had led to him needing to vent.

Paul was happy not to be part of that world; it seemed to be nothing but stress.

The expression on Shila’s face was one of fear. When she noticed him looking she nodded to the kitchen.

“Can I get you more water?” Paul said, taking the still half-full glass. “I’ll be right back.” Shila had already left.

She was muttering strings of nos when he entered the kitchen and if she had fur, she’d be ripping it out.

“What’s wrong?” Paul asked.

“This is the Nazis again,” she said.

Paul had trouble making the leap; no, he couldn’t make the leap. “The Nazis are spreading the sickness?” he tried.

“What? Don’t be stupid, the Nazis were working for the Chamber.”

“I thought they’d been used by the Chamber.” That story had been harder to piece together since Niel, rather than Thomas, had been involved for the majority of it. While Niel was much better at recounting stories than Thomas, he and Paul didn’t share the deep friendship that made Thomas come to him each time he had a bad day.

“Same thing,” she said with a dismissive wave of the hand. “Don’t you see it? This isn’t about going after Merlin. It’s about putting the staff into the hands of as many people as they can and forcing them to reach Apotheosis one after the other. If that girl hadn’t taken it

out of there, who knows how many more nurses and doctors would have been put through that.”

“But we already know the Chamber was involved, this doesn’t change that, does it?”

She looked at him. “Do you have any idea the kind of power needed to maintain something like this? I thought this had been an attack that had gotten out of hand. You heard her, Merlin’s clinic was the center of it. If figured they’d lost control, and it had reverted to a normal deadly sickness that would eventually run its course. But the next person to pick up the staff would have known what was going on. They’d think it was just a revelation, but it sounds like Merlin had worked it out, so they’d known that. And it would have brought it to an end quickly. Probably too quickly to keep people from asking how that had happened, but I would have taken that over the alternative.” She took a bottle of beer out of a cabinet, which Paul took out of her hand.

“What is the alternative?”

“They have a viral talisman powering... no, it can’t be a talisman, even that would need way more power than I can see the Chamber having, or it would have to be so fucking big they couldn’t hide it. Someone has a fucking viral staff.” She held onto the counter. “They have the Flemming.” She had her phone to her ear.

“The what?” Paul asked.

“You know of Alexander Flemming?” she demanded. “Pick up,” she told the phone.

“He figured out how Penicillin works. Wait, are you saying he was a Practitioner and he made a viral staff?”

“Yes, and no. The staff’s older than him. Grant! What did you do with the Flemming? Three years ago, come on, stop. What, you think I’d risk calling you in the middle of my troubles because I missed hearing the sound of your fucking voice? What did you do with it?”

She frowned. “Are you sure?” she nodded to herself, then turned her phone off. “Okay, it’s not the Flemming. Grant had to destroy it to keep it from falling into the Chamber’s hands.”

“So no viral staff?”

“No Flemming staff. It was probably the most powerful one out there. If that was what we were up against, I would have told you to run and never look back. Anything else we

have a chance.”

“What’s a Flemming staff?” Nina asked, stepping into the kitchen.

“What are you doing here?” Shila demanded.

“The living room is at the end of the hall and you basically screamed?” she said, looking bashful. “I couldn’t help hearing what you said.”

The pangola glared at the hare, before swinging that gaze towards the tiger. “You let her in,” Shila snapped, “You explain things.”

Paul nodded. His layperson’s understanding would make him more relatable. “What you’re holding is what a certain group of people who can use actual magic call a staff. Doctor Merlin was part of that group and he used his staff, the cane, to help people. But if they push themselves too hard while using their magic, they become part of the staff. That’s what you saw happen.”

Nina clutched the cane to herself as if she was afraid Paul would take it.

“There’s another group of people who want staves like this one, but they think that the more people have been absorbed by it, the more powerful it is. At first, we thought the epidemic was an attack on Doctor Merlin, but your story tells us they weren’t interested in stopping with him. You saved a lot of people by taking the staff out of there.”

She looked from him to Shila. “Magic is real? Doctor Merlin was…” Her chuckle was forced. “Merlin?”

“No,” Shila said, “Just a Practitioner who happened to have the name of a famous fictitious wizard.”

“Merlin isn’t real?” Paul asked.

Shila glared at him. “Really?”

“You just told me Flemming was a Practitioner. My best friend teleports- that’s another story,” he told Nina at her stunned expression. “There’s so many magical factions out there I am amazed no one outside of them actually knows they exist. So yeah, I thought Merlin was real.”

She shook her head. “Fiction, like a lot of stuff people think is real.”

“Alright,” Paul said. “How do we deal with this?”

Shila looked at him, but it was Nina who put words to her expression.

“You want to try and stop the magical people with staves that can make an entire city sick?”

“In principle, who wouldn’t. But personally myself, no,” Paul replied. “But we can’t ignore that we’re the only people with most of the puzzle pieces to what is going on. So we need to decide what to do with that information.” He looked at Shila and she nodded. “So, do you know which family is in charge of Denver? I know Thomas is terrified of being seen in Denver because of the Brislow guy, but it didn’t sound like he’s the one in charge.”

“Coroman, but we can’t go to them.”

“Why not?”

He did his best not to let Nina’s stunned expression make him chuckle. She was out of her depth. He was only in up to his crotch, thanks to Thomas and all his ranting.

“Because we can’t prove what we know.”

“We have the staff.”

“Which they probably don’t know anything about, let alone that Merlin was a Practitioner. Did Thoams ever tell you we don’t exactly play nice with others?”

“He did, but this is one of those situations where you think beyond yourself and to the greater good. What happens if the Chamber loses control of this sickness that’s powered by a staff and not just a talisman?”

“And what do we tell the Coroman when we go to them?” She demanded. “Hi, you have a group of insane wizards somewhere in your city, but we have no idea where they are hiding, and we don’t know what they’re using to make everyone sick, but hey, maybe you can do something about it?”

“Insane?” Nina asked, as if that was the most unbelievable thing in what Shila said.

“Criminal,” Shila snapped. “How else would you describe someone willing to sacrifice a whole fucking city just for a power-up?” That caused the hare’s mouth to snap

shut.

“What if we bring them the information on where they are?” Paul asked.

“And how the fuck do you figure we do that?” she replied.

“By asking the guy for whom finding lost and hidden stuff is what he does.”

It was her turn to close her mouth with an audible snap.

“Look, I leave the heroics to the people with the training for it,” Paul said. “But if the only way to convince those capable of acting to do so is to find out where the Chamber’s hiding, I say we do that much.”

Shila nodded. “We find Donal, he helps us figure out where the Chamber is and we go to the Coroman with actual information, not one thing more.”

“I’m good with that,” Paul said.

“Me too,” Nina said. “Although I don’t know who those people are.”

“Why do you think you get to come along, girly?” Shila demanded.

Nina straightened and for a moment she looked like someone able to take on the world, and almost immediately she vanished under Shila’s unimpressed glare.

“You said I saved people when I took Doctor Merlin’s staff from the clinic. I want to continue helping. I can’t just sit here and wait after finding out about all this.”

Shila looked like she’d argue. No, Paul decided, the pangolin looked ready to kick Nina to the curb, but then her expression shifted, and while the golden tiger didn’t know Shila that well, there were a lot of pranksters in the biotech and medical fields, and he’d seen that expression often enough. That one that screamed I’m getting an idea and while it might not be the brightest one, it is certainly going to be interesting to make it happen.

“You’re going to want to share with the class before you even think of acting on that, Shila,” Paul warned.

# Storyboard, 1.5-9

Paul didn't know how he felt about Shila's plan to take over the staff behind the epidemic hitting Denver. She'd considered giving him Merlin's staff, but that one was aligned with medicine, so a doctor was a better fit for it. The other staff had to be viral or genetic in nature, both closely aligning to someone from the biotech field.

Pointing out he was specializing in nutrition and muscle development hadn't dampened her enthusiasm. She had a solution to a problem, and she was sticking with it. If they encountered the staff wielder, they were taking it from them, and Paul was using it to end this problem so they could go on with fixing hers.

How they were going to get the staff away from the current wielder if they encountered them- She just shrugged and said Paul could think of something by then.

Paul was hoping gloves were enough to keep a staff from doing whatever they did to the people who were supposed to use them because he had no interest in joining the magical community so directly.

"Are you sure we should be going in that direction?" Nina asked. "That's one of the denser population centers. It's going to mean more infected."

"Just keep your phone with you and you'll be fine," Shila replied.

Nina had been reluctant to let a stranger handle her phone, but in the end she relented and now had the same anti-viral program in it that Paul had in his phone, as well as the 'look away' one. The hare had looked around every so often, as if she had trouble believing it was why no one bothered them as they walked.

"Are you sure?" the hare asked.

"Girly, now that I know this problem is because of a staff, I can promise you that my app is going to keep you from catching it. I don't know genetics or virology, but I know magic. That's going to get undone before it gets anywhere close to us."

"And you're keeping it to yourself?" Nina asked, her tone a mix of surprise and accusation.



Paul stepped between the two as the pangolin rounded on the hare. “Nina, magic isn’t like in fairytales. It has rules and limits that keep it from being a one stop fix all. In this case, without Shila to power the magic, those apps are just useless spaghetti code. I’m sure if it was within her capabilities, she’d spread the code throughout the city and stop all this.”

“Of course,” the hare said softly. “I’m sorry. It’s just...”

Paul turned to look at Shila.

“I would,” the pangolin said, as if he was accusing her.

“I know.”

As the density of people increased, so did the misery. Houses were marked as off-limits, people lined the sidewalks, most sick to one degree or another.

Shila avoided looking at them, Paul noticed, her expression miserable. Occasionally, she took out her phone and worked on it, only to put it away in frustration.

“Nina,” he asked after another block of sick people and those tending to them. “What’s the death rate?”

“What do you mean?” the hare asked.

“We’ve crossed nearly a dozen blocks and there’s a lot of sick, but I didn’t see one body. Or any indication bodies have been removed. I doubt there’s a working infrastructure able to deal with this level of sickness and the death it causes; at least not much of one left.”

“I...” she became thoughtful. “I don’t remember anyone actually dying of this. I mean, without knowing what this is, there’s no real way to know for sure, but the few deaths we’ve had were complications from the patient being sick. One of the main things attacked in the patient is their immune system, but even then we didn’t see a lot of death. But we’re just one clinic. The news probably had a better picture of the overall situation.”

“The news didn’t say anything about deaths that I remember,” Paul said. “Shila?”

“The Chamber’s keeping anything from getting out.” She was looking at her phone again.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Why?”

“We saw one of them among the reporters, so there’s got to be a dozen. They’re like cockroaches. As for why?” She raised her voice as Nina was about to say something. “Do I look like I have any idea how those people think?”

“Clearly not,” Nina said.

“Then don’t ask me about why they’re doing what they’re doing.”

“I guess the likeliest reason is that they want to keep the other magical communities from realizing this isn’t a normal sickness,” Paul mused.

“That’s as likely as any other reason,” Shila replied. She pointed ahead, where people were standing in line in front of a building with a long table with food on it and people behind it. There were more than the homeless standing in the line, but they all looked miserable, even those behind the table.

“You’re the doctor,” Shila told Nina. “You ask them where Hines is.”

“Why?” the hare asked.

The pangolin let out an exasperated sigh as she stopped and turned. “Because we need to find him so we can-”

“I mean, why are we, as medical people, looking for him? I don’t expect them to question who we are, but if we tell them we’re doctors, aren’t they more likely to ask us to help with the sick there?”

“Maybe we can need his help in creating a census of the homeless population,” Paul offered when Shila couldn’t find anything. “You said he’s the go-to for the homeless, so that would make sense.”

“It’s what I’ve heard,” Nina said, not sounding certain. “It might be best if we’re just helping doctors. I don’t know if I can be more than a nurse.”

“So long as it gets us pointed in Hines’ direction. It works,” Shila said. She swiped her phone. “I’m going to drop the cloak, so be on your guard. Even this close to a large group,, there might be people willing to mug us.”

Nina held Merlin’s cane tight to her, but she followed when Shila started walking again, without looking around for threats. Closer to the table, they were the ones getting the

looks; suspicion, fear, frustration.

Paul realized that as they bypassed the line, people worried they were cutting in front, or possibly here to shut it down. They hadn't seen any police presence yet. Was that because this area was quiet enough not to need them, or because they had been abandoned?

"Excuse me," Nina called to a black bear on the emaciated side, handing paper cups of steaming liquid from a tray behind her to people.

The bear took one look at them, and he called, "Gerald, tourists."

A bat stepped out of the building, and unlike the bear she was muscular, but she looked even more exhausted. The effort to be civil was visible. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Nina Haldi," the hare answered, her voice confident. "I'm Doctor Merlin's nurse. They are helping me. He sent me to locate Mister Donal Hines because-"

"Don?"

"Yes, we need to speak with him because he-"

"You'll probably find him in Lodo. We haven't had anyone here from there for a few days, and when I mentioned that to him a few hours ago he said he'd go check in on them. The odds are they're just well enough to not need our help, but you never know. This thing seems to go up and down without reason. Then there's the looters."

"Where's Lodo?" Shila demanded.

The bat looked at the pangolin and Paul stepped in since it looked like the brusqueness could be what caused the bat to tell them to fuck off.

"I'm sorry for her sharp tone," the golden tiger said. "We've been looking for a while and this is the first time we've had someone who's seen him. It's rather important we talk with him."

The bat took a few breaths before nodding. She pointed. "Take Champa to the twenty-second and make a left. Once you hit the baseball field, you'll be in Lodo. From there he could be anywhere."

Paul smiled. "Thank you."

#####

The baseball field turned out to be a small stadium with a group of healthy-looking, wealthy-looking, people keeping anyone from approaching. The weapons they carried kept any but the most determined from approaching, then having one of those shoved in their face sent them away quickly.

Paul had kept an eye on Nina as they walked by. As a nurse, she had to find this treatment of others appalling. But she didn't even look at it. She walked ahead, face neutral. She no longer even seemed to notice the people standing in doorways, or alleys. There had been a few fights as they traveled, Shila's cloak keeping them from being pulled in, but Nina had ignored them.

Or, Paul figured, she couldn't afford to notice them anymore. She'd already been through weeks of watching people suffer. He couldn't imagine lasting this long before it got to be too much. It was something he'd seen in the medical students at the university after long nights working the emergency room as part of their training.

He'd tried to help those he'd become friends with, and in the process had found out the best thing to do was to give them space until they were functional enough to appreciate the help.

Past the stadium, Paul had Shila drop the cloak long enough so he could go ask one of the healthier people about a squirrel going around looking after people. It took multiple tries before someone pointed them south, then it was even more before another sent them west. Not long after that, they found out that Donal had been in that area, but had gone north not long before they arrived.

Shila's exasperated cursing finally gave way to hopeful grunts as they set on their way. Nina was.. Nina. Or a numb Nina. She looked tired, but it seemed to be more physical than emotional. She'd have to have any emotional energy left for it to register.

She was going to need weeks of rest and possibly therapy to recuperate from this. He hoped she would. The person he'd met at Donal's house seemed to want to help as many as she could.

The sound of a fight ahead made Paul sigh. There had been too many of them, and while people didn't notice them, it was best to go around the block because not being noticed meant no one would try to avoid hitting them with thrown stuff.

"Isn't that a squirrel?" Nina said, seeming to come back to life.

She was right. In the middle of four people, a squirrel was trying to hold his own.

Shila cursed. "The Chamber beat us to him."

"No," Nina said.

"I don't think so," Paul said, hurrying to his aid. They were in front of a shattered storefront with boxes littering the sidewalk. He figured Donal had found them looting the place and tried to stop them.

None of them reacted to Paul's presence until he grabbed one of their arms and pulled him away, then all of them seemed surprised that he was there.

They got over that quickly enough, and Paul dodged a clumsy punch, throwing one in return and getting lucky. The rottweiler backpedaled, hand to his bleeding muzzle. Paul sidestepped a swing, just in time, from a rabbit, then she was hit by a box thrown by Shila.

The looter realized they no longer had the advantage and ran.

"Wow," the squirrel said, straightening. "You guys have great timing." His jacket was old, and some of the clearly homemade restitching had ripped in the fight, but other than a cut on his cheek, he seemed okay. He smiled at Paul, taking a step forward.

Paul offered his hand. "It's good to see you again D-"

Instead of shaking his hand, the squirrel placed each of his on the sides of the golden tiger's head and kissed him

Kissed him hard.

Paul tensed as the tongue pushed past his lips. Then he had his hands on the other man's shoulder and pushed him away. He didn't know Donal anywhere near well enough to be okay with this.

The look of surprise and shock on Donal's face kept Paul from doing more than glaring.

"I have no idea where that came from," the squirrel said, raising his hands placatingly.

"I'm sure," Shila said. "You Hines?"

“I am,” he looked at them, and when his gaze fell on the cane Nina held, his shoulders sagged. “This isn’t going to be good news, is it?”

“That’s going to depend entirely on how helpful you can be,” Shila replied.

# Storyboard, 1.5-10

“The Chamber?” Donal asked as they walked to an apartment building. “They’re who is behind this?”

“Really?” Shila said, “it’s that hard to believe?”

The squirrel looked at the cane Nina held, then shook his head.

“Good, then how about we work on figuring out where they’re hiding instead of...” the pangolin motioned around them.

“Instead of providing some level of comfort to those society has a habit of not giving a damn about?” Donal finished.

“Donal,” Paul said, cutting off Shila. “Wouldn’t fixing the problem go further toward helping everyone? Once we know where those causing this are, we can give the information to the Cormoran family and-”

The squirrel’s snort stopped the golden tiger.

“Or maybe there’s someone better you think we should contact?” Paul offered. “The Cormorans are the only ones I know of, other than the Brislow.”

“Normally, if you want help taking down bad guys, they’re who you’d go to,” Donal said. “The Cormoran are administrators more than anything else. The problem is that from what I hear, every security agency, legal, paralegal, and barely legal, has been pushed to their limits by this. Knowing there’s someone behind it, I’m guessing they made sure they were particularly busy.”

“We can still tell people who can do something with the information,” Paul said.

Donal gave Paul a look the golden tiger couldn’t decipher.

“It’d be easier to just deal with this ourselves,” Donal said.

“No,” Shila started, as Nina had a coughing fit.

“I’m okay,” the hare wheezed.

“You’re not Grant, and I’m not anyone who takes down ‘bad guys’. You tell us where they’re hiding, we tell people who have the know-how and the desire, and we let them deal with that while me and Paul go handle my problems.”

“You really think this had nothing to do with you, Shila?” Donal asked, pushing the apartment building door open.

“I’m not some hero,” she spat, following him, “I’m a hacker. I’m not even one of those white hats.” The squirrel gave her a look, but he was knocking on a door before she could continue.

Paul stayed away while Donal spoke in low tones with the harried-looking feather. By the time the door closed, they both looked pleased.

“You think I’m not affected by this?” Shila spat. “I’m not dead inside. But this isn’t my thing.”

Donal stopped as he was about to knock on the next door. “This is everyone’s thing, Shila. The only question is if it’ll be too late by the time those who can do something about it get off their lazy ass and do something about it.”

“Doesn’t that mean you should help us, Donal?” Paul asked.

Instead of answering, the squirrel knocked on the door. When it opened, only as far as the security chain allowed, the person on the other side was no older than eleven.

Donal crouched to be at her height. “Hi, are your parents here?”

The girl bit her lower lip. “My mom said not to speak to strangers.”

“That’s wise of her. My name’s Donal. Is she here?”

The shake of her head was small, but the slumping shoulders said a lot.

“How long has she been gone?”

“Long. She went to get food.”



Donal offered her a small doll made of scraps of fabric. “Can you look after Dolly for me? She’s scared of what’s happening and while you do that, I’ll do what I can to find your mom, okay?”

The girl nodded and took the doll, then closed the door.

“I’ll help.” Donal stood and took out a phone. He closed his eyes and put it to his ear. “Lou, it’s Donal. I need you to keep an eye out for a woman, pomeranian, who lives in the Santon building, apartment one-oh-four. She’s... still around. Not sure where, but within a few blocks. It’s the best I can give you. Something came up. I’ll finish with the building, then I have to take care of something. Can you have your people come by every so often? Thanks.”

“I can do a search for her,” Shila said.

Donal shook his head. “Lou and his people will find her. We have more important things to do. First, I’m not a crystal ball. I can’t just tell you where the Chamber’s hiding. That’s not how I work. Second, when I find them, we’re going to be close, so do you have any thought as to how we’re going to deal with being spotted?”

Shila thumbed at Paul.

“Excuse me?” the golden tiger said.

“Have you looked at yourself?” the pangolin asked. “And you’ve already dealt with a few fights.”

“Against looters,” Paul protested. “And that was mostly luck and them not knowing how to fight. How do you expect me to take on someone from the Chamber with a staff?”

“Clock him, or her, and take the staff. Look, this isn’t Italy, or even what Grant used to deal with. They came here for Merlin. They set things up to force apotheosis on him. The staff is either viral or genetic, and you have the best antiviral in existence. So they can’t do anything to you.”

“What about another one?” Nina asked and immediately bit her lower lip. “You make it sound like this Chamber is pretty big. What if there’s another one there? Are you going to be able to protect Paul with what you do?”

Shila looked at the hare with what Paul thought was a hint of respect. “It’s going to depend on what the staff does. I need to see what it can do before I can do anything useful.

Paul told you, this isn't a story. I can't just program a 'save Paul from everything' app."

"But it isn't going to get to that, right?" Paul said.

"If it does," donal said, "I'm sure I can find you something to fight with. But before we get to that, my third point is that you're going to help me clear the building before we start. All that means is that we knock on the doors, and make sure the people in the apartment are okay. If there's any doubt, give them the location of George's shelter, and she'll look after them. I don't expect a lot of that. This neighborhood seems to be having a good day. When we're done, give me the apartment number of anyone you think should be looked after, and I'll make sure someone drops by later in the day."

Paul looked at Shila, who looked appalled at the idea. "I'll do it with Shila. Nina, will you be okay on your own?"

Her nod was hesitating at first, but gained confidence.

"Good," Donal said. "We each take a floor and meet down here when we're done."

#####

Donal was on his phone as they walked away from the building. As he'd predicted, most people were fine but pleased to see someone was looking in on them. Over four floors, each with a dozen apartments, only a handful needed to be check on, and the squirrel was making those arrangements.

Then the squirrel made a left through an alley, and Paul allowed himself to fall behind to join Nina; she'd been lagging since they left the building.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied, but it sounded forced.

"You know you don't have to continue with us, right? You've been a great help, but this should be done soon. And there's also the possibility things might turn violent at some point."

She smiled. "That sounds like a perfect reason for me to stick with you. Shila doesn't strike me as someone who knows a lot about first aid."

"If the information's online, I wouldn't be surprised if she can just access it and

suddenly know how to do it. I know kung-fu, and all that.” The hare’s uncomprehending look told him she didn’t get the reference. It was an old one, he had to admit.

“You and Shila. You’ve been friends for a long time?” Nina asked.

“Acquaintances, and only for a few days, really. My best friend is how I knew of her.”

The hare looked at him, surprised. “Then why are you here with her? From the little I caught, her problems don’t sound any small than what’s going on here.”

Paul shrugged. “She needed help.”

“That’s very... noble of you.”

Paul couldn’t help getting the sense she’d intended to use another word, and he didn’t blame her. “I prefer to think of it as decent.”

“What are you going to do when this is over?” Nina absently ran a hand over the cane she carried.

“Hopefully find a company to work for that’ll let me do my own research.”

“Nutrition and muscle development.” She looked him up and down. “You seem to be doing well in both of those.”

He chuckled. “You haven’t met my friends. I’m a borderline beanpole compared to them. But it’s mainly to help others. There’s a lot of factors that get in the way of someone building muscles and I want to figure out ways for those who are interested in getting over those hurdles and reaching whatever they desire.”

“You sound pretty passionate about it.”

“I guess I am. Been thinking about that sort of stuff since my early teens. It’s guided my studies, and now it’s just about finding the people to support it.”

She nodded, and it looked like she might say something, but then remained silent as they followed Donal, who seemed to walk aimlessly through Denver’s streets.

#####

“So,” Dona said, looking at the hotel. “What is it with magic people and fancy

hotels?”

“Easy to come and go in a hotel,” Shila said.

“And people with money want to make sure you know they have it,” Donal added.

“And they’re in there?” Nina asked, awed.

“Twenty bucks on the penthouse,” Paul said.

“I don’t know,” Donal said. “That doesn’t feel right. But if I were them, I’d have talismans up to make it hard for anyone to find them, and even I’m not immune to those.”

“You got us here,” Nina said.

“But this might be the furthest I can ‘guide’. Any more will have to be the old fashion way.”

“What is that?” Paul asked.

Donal smiled at him. “Without magic.”

“We’re fine,” Shila said. “We know where they are. Let’s just tell that Brislow guy and he can storm the gates.”

“Is that really the best thing to do?” Nina asked. “Wouldn’t it be better if we knew at least what floor they were on?”

“Girly, I’m not-”

“I’m with her,” Donal said, then looked at Paul.

“You realize that Shila’s protection is going to fail at just the right moment, right?”

“Wrong moment,” the squirrel said. “That’s what you mean. The right one would be if her magic failing under the strength of their wards ended up benefiting us.”

“At least you know what I mean. But yeah; the way things have been going, this isn’t going to be smooth.”

“Sounds like you’re siding with them,” Shila said unhappily.

“There’s a lot of people in that hotel, Shila,” he replied. “If there’s one thing I’ve gotten from Thomas is that the Chamber isn’t afraid of causing collateral deaths and damage. The more information we can give to whoever will come to deal with them, the better odds they can contain this. It’s still just a recon, just a little closer than we’d initially thought.”

“And how do you plan on not being noticed?” she said. “There’s only so much my cloak can do under the strain of other talismans trying to see through it.”

“Leave that to me,” Donal said, “and follow me.”

#####

Paul felt like a trained quad monkey in the green and gold suit he had on. It was garish with the epaulets, and a cap that wasn’t quite the right model to accommodate his ears. But, it clearly marked him as one of the employees, therefore as someone it was fine to ignore.

At the back of the hotel, Donal had brought them to a rack of uniforms waiting to be brought in. ‘Forgotten there’, the squirrel had said as he took four and handed them out. Then he plucked the hidden paper by the door with the code to the lock and got them in. They’d changed in the restroom and then had agreed to split up.

None of them were happy about it, but time was of the essence. As Shila had said, now that they were inside, the Chamber had to have an idea people who didn’t belong were there. They’d have to rely on looking like they belonged there to not be noticed by the Chamber.

That unfortunately meant that while Paul had been mostly ignored as he walked from one floor to the other, he’d been requested to help some guests three times already. The last one, a group of wealthy business people who tasked him with carrying a travel case containing the props for their demonstration.

He got to listen to them complain about the inconvenient timing of the emergency, as it meant they had to settle for a video conference instead of an in-person meeting.

Another couple, riding the elevator on his way back to the food he’d been on, went on and on about the marvel that was good hotels and how they were lucky to have picked one that had kept the sickness at bay.

Paul had been tempted to tell them it was because they were staying in the same

hotel the people engineering it was and see how they'd take that, but good sense took precedence.

Back on his floor, Paul returned to searching for clues where the Chamber was. The only advice Donal had for them was that they'd feel off. Shila had added that they'd more than likely rely on their talismans to remain unnoticed by the staff and guests, but she was confident the app she'd added to their phones would let them see through that.

So Paul finished sweeping the eighth floor, then took the stairs to the ninth, hoping the others had better luck. They'd divided the forty-eight floors among them, and Paul had the lowest twelve. Four to go, and he hoped one of the others would send the signal they'd found it soon. He'd made the mistake of grabbing a snack on an unattended tray and it had only reminded him he hadn't eaten anything in hours.

The hotel floor plan wasn't rectangular, but more like a claw with hallways branching off here and there to maximize the number of rooms on each floor.

He was passing one such hall when someone called, "There you are."

Paul glanced in the direction and froze at the glare he received. The woman wore a suit with a name tag. The suit was understated gray but screamed, 'I'm in charge'. Paul looked around.

"Don't give me that," she said. "Come here. Do you have any idea how long you've kept me waiting?"

Paul swallowed.

She seemed utterly normal, except for how he couldn't shake the feeling that her waiting for him wasn't a case of mistaken identity. After all, how many golden tigers could there be working here?

Zero was the most likely number.

Running wasn't an option, so he headed in her direction. He couldn't go with her either. The odds were she'd take him to the Chamber alright, but he didn't want to meet them. Just know where they were.

That only left him with one option, and he hated it.

"Now," she said.

‘I’m sorry.’

“You better damn be sorry. They requested that you be here fifteen minutes ago. Come with-”

Paul struck her across the muzzle, then hurried to catch her, shocked it had worked.

Okay, now what?

He looked around, but it was the sound of the ice machine that guided him to an out-of-the-way place where he could wait for the others. Shila or Donal would have an idea how to get the information from the... he checked the name tag. Manager.

How they’d known to look for him specifically, Paul didn’t know. Maybe it would be something Shila or Donal would find out. Maybe not.

He put her down as gently as he could, next to the ice machine, and tried to get her comfortable. He didn't know if this qualifies as the emergency Shila had meant when she’d added the panic button app on their phones, but at least it would get them to him in a hurry.

He was reaching for his phone when he caught the motion out of the corner of his eye, and he was moving out of the way of the approaching whatever-that-was before it fully registered it was aimed at his face.

He almost made it.

Somehow he’d twisted enough for his face to be out of the way of the fist coming at him, but he’d been so focused on that that he hadn’t noticed the fist was holding something that extended past it. That connected with the side of his head with enough strength that he felt his feet lift off the floor before the world blacked out.

# Storyboard, 1.5-11

Paul woke to a splitting headache, the sound of fabric being ruffled, and the tension in his wrists, shoulder, and back. Those were what told him not to move. He was hunched forward, being held in place by how his wrists were tied behind his back. The headach was the result of the hit on the side of his head. The fabric?

He cracked an eye open and looked down at his boxer-covered crotch. He was so happy he'd brought them in the shower with him this morning. His mother's admonition to always wear clean underwear went back to when he was a kid, and being on the run made that tough. Once this was over, he should consider making himself a go-bag and ensure there was at least a week's worth of underwear in it.

"Hey," a man said, "look who's awake."

So much for playing possum and learning anything. Paul straightened, and his back thanked him, as did his wrists once the pressure was off them.

The room wasn't what he'd expected. No large penthouse with all the amenities. Two double beds, a dresser, a desk, and a screen on the wall. It was larger than the rooms he'd stayed in these days, but these people weren't living it large.

The room felt small with the five of them, plus him. They each had an air of dangerous business in how they looked at him, but two caught his attention. The rhinoceros, because of the strangest of telescopes he held, with it's pitted black surface and knobs on the end with the obvious eyepiece. And the chimpanzee holding the gold cane- no, brass- with all the bumps and valleys and... were those letters? He canted his head, trying to make some of them out.

L, O, V, E...

That was a strange thing to have on a cane.

Only that wasn't a cane, that was a staff, and once he realized that, the facts that the bumps on it were all in sets of four and that they were all brass, locked what it was into place.



A staff of brass knuckles. No wonder the impact had knocked him out so hard.

That meant the other one wasn't a telescope, no unless Shila had gotten what the Chamber was up to utterly wrong. It was a microscope.

"Well, I'd love to see you deny you know who we are now," the chimpanzee said.

Paul tried to look like he didn't understand what he meant, and the rhino chuckled.

"Don't go into acting. Trust me on that."

The three others, a buffalo, a koala, and a gorilla, who was holding Paul's pants in one hand, and his phone in the other- Hopefully it was still locked- didn't have staves but had guns at their belts.

"Now," the rhinoceros said, "how about you tell me what the two practitioners you're traveling with can do? And this is just to make our lives easier. We'll find out eventually, but I would much rather we do that from you than from her."

Paul shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. I do room service. I'm not traveling with anyone."

"I don't think hotel employees are allowed to have phones that do that when I try to get into them." The gorilla turned the phone so Paul could see the screen and odd-colored waves moved on it. "Well?" she asked.

He knew he didn't have any apps on there that did visuals like those. Had Shila put extra apps without telling him? He didn't put it past her.

Paul shook his head.

"I am so glad," the chimpanzee said, taking a step forward, slapping the staff into his open hand. Paul felt the shockwave of the impact from where he sat.

The rhino stopped him by putting his staff in the way. "No. I don't want his head ripped off his body. Joshua, why don't you explain to mister Heeran why it's in his benefit to cooperate with us?"

The koala smiled and stepped forward. "It'll be my pleasure." His accent was so thick, Paul thought it was an act. There was no way people from Boston spoke like that. "You gonna answer the question?"

Paul only got half a shake of the head out before the fist connected with his muzzle and his head snapped to the side. The pain was such that he saw stars. He's always thought that was a figure of speech before.

The koala centered his head again and wound back for another. Paul's eyes went wide with fear before closing them in anticipation.

"You just have to tell me what I want to know."

Paul swallowed his fear and shook his head again. The fist hit him on the other side of his muzzle and the snap of his head was such Paul thought his spine would wrench out of his back.

"Just so you know," the koala said, "I actually like doing this, so as far as I'm concerned, I want you to hold out for as long as possible."

"You're a sadist," Paul mumbled.

"What can I say? I needed a hobby." The punch rattled Paul's teeth.

Fuck, that was another one he'd thought was a figure of speech. He so hadn't signed up for this. He opened his eyes and found that only one of them cooperated, and the glee on the koala's face made him clamp his mouth shut. He wasn't giving that guy the satisfaction.

The koala smirked in return, and changed the punch, catching Paul under the muzzle and lifting him and the chair off the floor. Then he crashed off balance. The chair's legs snapped, and he fell back hard enough he thought some of the breaking sounds were his bones.

The koala yanked him up hard and Paul realized he wouldn't hold out. Pain hurt. He'd heard stories, had people describe how much pain they'd been in because of this accident, or that stupid thing, but he'd never expected to experience it. When he looked at the rhino, the man wore a satisfied smile. He knew it was just a question of how much pain they inflicted before Paul told them all he knew.

The only hope he had was that the Koala miscalculated and broke his neck with the next hit.

The door shattered inward just as Paul's phone rang. Then a call connected. The gorilla looked at it, frowning, as the others in the room stepped back, reading themselves for a fight.

Paul's thinking was clear. Somehow the pain was only a shadow of itself. He made out Donal's voice, and he realized they were here to rescue him.

And they were about to get their asses handed to them.

Paul shouldered the koala away and ran for the chimpanzee. Shila and Donal could deal with the ones without magic, and even the rhino. But they weren't expecting a combat staff, and even if they did he didn't think either of them had something to deal with someone so physical.

That meant it was his job to keep the chimpanzee from using his brass-knuckle staff on them.

The chimpanzee stepped out of the way, and Paul turned on his toes, trying for a spin kick. He missed, but the chimpanzee stepped back and focused on him, a grin forming on his muzzle. He swung at Paul, holding the cane by the shaft, but Paul knew to watch for the whole thing now and was quick enough to dance out of the way.

With his hands behind his back, he was limited in what he could do. But at least his opponent was slow and not particularly skilled. He seemed to rely on the powers in his staff to get the job done, so all Paul had to do was stay out of reach.

Yeah, like that was going to be possible in a hotel room with other people fighting. He had to end this and end it fast.

He ducked left, zigged right, and in a move that would make Niel so proud if he lived to tell his friend about it, he fought dirty.

His foot landed squarely in the chimpanzee's balls, and Paul winced in sympathy at the pain that showed on the man's face. Then the staff clattered to the floor, and the chimpanzee was curled in a ball, holding his crotch, and possibly crying. Paul was too busy dropping to the floor to get his tied arms under his feet and in front of him.

He sighed in relief as he got to his feet again, his shoulder unbunching.

The koala was down, as was the gorilla. Shila was facing the rhino while Donal somehow held his own against the buffalo.

Nina entered the room, and Paul was about to tell her to go back outside when he noticed that instead of carrying Merlin's cane, she was holding it by the handle, the way a cane was meant to be held. It looked like the staff had been calling to her after all, and that

she'd made her choice, Paul thought, then noticed the confidence in her steps, the smile on her lips.

The cane came down, and as the tip hit the floor, it might as well have hit Paul in the balls. He bent down, holding his crotch. Fuck, that hurt. Out of the corner of his tearing eyes, he saw the chimpanzee relax.

Paul looked up at Nina. There was no compassion in those eyes, only a glee that was far too similar to that the Koala had worn as he punched Paul.

Oh, Fuck.

She was Chamber. The smile as she looked at him was enough of a confirmation. She was delighting in the pain she was inflicting on him. The pain of the kick to the balls he'd given the chimpanzee.

Fuck, it hurt.

Paul pushed himself up.

But he'd already suffered plenty of pain already, and even with it numb, he had its memory to fuel him. The memory of knowing he'd been about to tell them everything he knew just so he wouldn't feel more pain.

He kept his eyes on the hare. Was Nina even her real name? Had she really been Merlin's nurse?

He also kept track of the chimpanzee out of the corner of his eye as he took the brass-knuckle staff and got to his feet. Paul counted on their overconfidence. After all, Nina knew he was just some guy helping a friend of a friend. He'd told her that much. She'd seen him fight, but that was only against normal people, people driven to it by desperation. Desperation her and her group had engineered.

And they had magic on their side. While Paul couldn't say magic people were over-dependent on their magic, as he didn't know enough of them, he had noticed the trend.

When the chimpanzee wound back, holding the cane like a baseball bat, he was slow and clumsy again. Paul ducked at the last instant, and rushed forward, ignoring his screaming balls. Even if Nina had transferred the damage along with the pain, it was nothing compared to what was coming if he didn't stop her.

And as much as he hated what he was about to do, he didn't have a choice. He wound back and he approached and Nina's confidence broke under the violence he promised, and she raised her hand to protect herself.

Paul smiles as she too closed her eyes at the expected pain, and he opened his hand, changing from a swing to a grab. He could sacrifice his normal life, if it meant saving Shila, Donal, and everyone else the Chamber was making suffer with this.

His fingers closed around the shaft of the cane and he tensed to pull it out of her hand.

-and was flung across the room with a shock that made his body tense the way having electricity run through it did. He slammed against the back wall hard enough he knew he'd end up with a concussion. Before darkness took him, he had one last thought.

This better not happen again today.

Three times was a pattern.

# Storyboard, 1.5-12

Paul's return to consciousness came courtesy of being shaken.

"Fuck," he gumbled, hand going to his head. He felt like the morning after that party where he'd discovered alcohol.

"Wake up," a woman said, "we got to talk."

He forced an eye open, and a pangolin was watching him. "Fuck." He'd been hoping the memory of the last few days had been an alcohol-induced dream.

"Let him rest, Shila," Donal said.

"I'm up," Paul replied. He didn't think Shila would let him go back to sleep, and if his memory was in any way accurate, they didn't have time. He sat up and his phone slid off his chest. He caught a line on it that looked like what he'd see on a heart monitor, but more colorful, before the screen went black. Wrapped in sections around his arms, chest, and head were what looked like strips of kids' sheets, with faded fire trucks and bright airplanes.

He wasn't in pain, so he figured the phone and the strips were part of the reason. Not that he could understand how the strips worked. Practitioner magic was more about concepts than anything else, so... he looked at the squirrel.

"They're from a children's hospital that closed down a few years ago," Donal answered his tilted ear. "They were supposed to have been packed and donated to shelters and people in need, but they got misplaced. I came across them a while back when I was badly hurt. They've served me well since."

Paul nodded. That was why they'd worked.

"How are you still alive?" he asked, "or free. Not sure what the Chamber would have done once they captured us."

"You dealt with the bruiser," Shila said. Paul raised his hand to stop her.

“I’m pretty sure Nina sent me flying, and I lost consciousness.”

“You went flying alright,” Donal said with a chuckle that earned him a glare from Shila. “Between you and that wall was a chimpanzee. You knocked him out as hard as you knocked yourself out.”

“Okay, how did we get here? Wherever this is...” the room had a sense of being abandoned for a while. The wallpaper was discolored and peeling in places. There was the distinctive scent of mildew and the mattress he was sitting on- he looked at it, worried that was where the smell came from- was in great condition. The only thing in the room that was.

“I carried you,” Donal said, and Paul tilted an ear, looking the thin man over. “Yes, I used magic. We’re in an abandoned apartment building three blocks away from the hotel. It was the closest place I was sure the Chamber wouldn’t find us once those unconscious muscles woke up to tell their boss we got away with two of their staves.”

Paul saw them on the dresser that didn’t look capable of supporting their weights. The black microscope staff, and the brass knuckle one. Which meant- “Nina?”

“The bitch ran,” Shila said. “If I ever find her, I am going to rip her head off for what she did to Merlin.”

“Do we know she did anything?” Paul asked. “The sickness would have been enough to push him to overuse his staff, right?”

“That doesn’t make her innocent, Paul,” Donal said. “The chamber always picks someone to wield a practitioner’s staff and makes sure they’re close when they are forced to reach apotheosis. She probably told the truth when she said she was Merlin’s nurse.”

Shila snorted.

“And she was probably not the person behind all this, although I wouldn’t be surprised if she had come up with the idea to get other doctors and nurses to use the staff and quickly overextend themselves, since they didn’t have any training. When it’s about saving lives, it’s easy to think that little voice saying you should step back is cowardice and push through. The fact she came to my house means that part of their plan was done and they had something in mind for me. Which you sidetracked.”

Paul sighed. “What do we do now? Go after her?”

“Now,” Shila spat, “You get to explain why you held out on us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Paul,” Donal said, and was glared at again as he’d interrupted what looked to be the mother of all rants from Shila. “Nina didn’t attack you.”

“I have the blackout to contradict you.”

“That was the staff defending itself. Unclaimed staves won’t let followers other than Chamber or Practitioners hold them, and the most definitive thing that separates the Chamber from we Practitioners is that they don’t claim their staves. What you experienced was more along the line of generic unclaimed staff defense than anything Nina could have produced from Merlin’s staff.”

“So who are you with?” Shila demanded, “And why the fuck didn’t you tell me? Do you have any idea what I could have done with more magic on hand?”

Paul looked from Donal to Shila and back, trying to make sense of what they were talking about. “I don’t do magic,” he finally said.

Donal let out a defeated sigh. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“Oh bullshit. You’re a Knife, aren’t you? You and your fucking secrecy.”

“He isn’t one of them, Shila. That’d I’d know.”

She glared at him. “Oh really? You would be able to see through the masters of misdirection? You going to try and sell me the Golden Gate bridge next?”

“Don’t be an idiot, from what Grant told me of them, nothing can find them if they don’t want to be found. But Paul was a victim of Henry Stoker. I know you weren’t on the ground for that escapade, but do you at least remember I was the one who restored everyone’s memories? Paul was one of my simpler patients, but something like history with the Knives would have stood out; not to mention Stoker would have used him rather than keeping him as a hostage.”

“So he joined since then.”

“A biotech student, Shila. You know a lot more about them than I do. Tell me if Paul fits the mold of a Knife.”

“Then he’s from one of the other factions and he’s keeping it to himself!”



“I don’t do magic,” Paul said calmly.

“You can,” Donal states. “You might not know it, but you can. Otherwise you’d have been able to take the staff from Nina.”

“But I’d know if I was, wouldn’t I?”

“Fuck!” Shila yelled. “Are we really doing this song and dance again?”

“I promise you, Shila. If I had been holding out on you for some reason, I’d tell you now. But how? Because there are no tiger Survivors, and the Society route is too convoluted to do by accident if you know what it is.”

Donal sighed, then looked at the pangolin. Shila looked ready to bite, but eventually slumped her shoulders before talking. “Discovering magic like me and Donal is rare, but only because there aren’t gods involved. Which to be clear, you aren’t like us; you’d have been able to touch Merlin’s staff if you were, and would a have a staff of your own.”

“Gods, though... while they require consent, the trick is that it doesn’t necessarily have to be consent with the god, only consent with the act the god is associated with. That’s how Niel and Thomas got initiated but Victor didn’t; the sex involved with forming a bond to Him has to be consensual, but he doesn’t need to tell you it’s happening.”

“While the factions are very structured and organized getting these events to happen, they are ultimately mortal constructs built around their gods’ whims. A god doesn’t need their faction’s permission to form a bond with mortals, leaving some factions to not recruit but instead search for those their god has whimsically formed a bond with.”

Once it was clear she was done, Paul looked to Donal for either confirmation or elaboration.

The squirrel sighed. “I haven’t done much research on them, but I have run across unaware followers of Ashimir while working with the shelters; that’s the goddess observation, knowledge, and survival. And been contacted rather firmly by their therapists that they needed to delve into a deeper understanding with Ashimir on their own. I didn’t probe further than that, so aside from saying whatever you are you aren’t like them, I don’t know much else on the subject.”

“Okay, but without me knowing what faction I’m with, I’m basically just a normal guy.”

“No,” Shila said through clenched teeth. “A normal guy would be able to pick up that staff,” she gestured flamboyant towards the microscope on the dresser, “And put an end to this fucking thing.” She pulled out her phone, muttering to herself.”

“Okay, so I’m out of the running for being a staff holder. Doesn’t Denver have a medical university? We can find someone who’d be able to use it, right? How about a hospital, plenty of doctors there?”

“They’re going to be too busy with emergencies to have the time to listen to us,” Donal said. “And with an epidemic, I doubt the university will have anyone. Those with enough skills will be out there helping, those who don’t have the skills will...” he chuckled. “Probably still be out there helping.”

Paul nodded. For as much as he didn’t always think well of people as a whole, it took a certain personality to make it through the gruesome years of medical studies. And that tended to weed out those who ran at the first sign of trouble.

“How about you?” Paul asked. “Couldn’t you find the right candidate and take the staff to him?”

Donal shook his head. “I don’t find stuff, or people, Paul I find what’s lost or hidden. I mean, I could make a talisman and maybe that would guide me to someone, but it would be no more reliable than any use of predictive magic. It’s a rare person who has a reliable precognitive ability.” He chuckled. “And even those aren’t immune to getting stuff wrong.”

“So were fu-”

“No, no, no, no.”

Paul was on his feet and took Shila by the shoulder. “What’s wrong?” her eyes were fixed on her phone, but Paul couldn’t see the screen for some reason.

She looked at him, eyes filled with fear, then did something on the screen and a voice came from her phone.

“No one knows how a carrier made it so deep outside the quarantine zone,” John,” a man said, “But Castle Rock, Strasburg, as well as Fort Collins are now reporting cases of infection and rapid spread of the sickness. Just ten minutes ago, half a dozen of the National guards fell sick, and I’ve heard reports of the CDC locking their doors because doctors inside the labs have fallen sick too.”

“Are we looking at a case of viral samples being released into the population,

Marcel?”

The reporter laughed bitterly. “How would I know? We’re dealing with chaos here, and there’s no one to give us answers. The way things are going, there isn’t going to be anyone in charge to keep this from getting worse.” He trailed off.

“Marcel, are you there? What can you-”

“I have to go.”

“Marcel, you-”

“I have to call my wife.” The call disconnected.

“Well,” the announcer said, sounding put off. “We will get in contact with Marcel as soon as we can and provide you more information on this developing situation. Until then, let’s go to Johanna with the highlights to last night’s football game.”

“Is Nina doing this?” Paul asked. The glee in those eyes as she inflicted pain on him. He could imagine her lashing out like this. He should have realized it wasn’t empathy exhaustion, but just plain lack of it.

“There’s no fucking way that bitch had the kind of power needed to pull this off,” Shila snarled. “She’s just Chamber.”

“But she knows the sickness,” Donal said. “Probably better than the doctors or the rhinoceros, since she was on the front line with Merlin.”

“Is there any way this is the natural progression of the sickness?” Paul asked Donal. “I mean, what if before now it wasn’t the staff pushing the virus forward, but holding it back to a level that worked for them?”

“I don’t know,” Donal replied. “My interactions with the Chamber have been minimal, but Grant says they have a habit of taking on more than they can handle.”

“Okay, look, I know some doctor or someone in the medical field would be ideal, but can’t we just hand this to someone out there and tell them what to do? I don’t think we have the time to get to a hospital or a university the way it’s spreading now.”

The squirrel shook his head. “The only thing we’d do is force someone to reach apotheosis for no reason, and that’s if the staff worked for them. What we need is to find

someone close by with some kind of medical knowledge; that's going to maximize the chance of them being able to contain this. But that's not my area. It needs a search algorithm, and that's..." Donal trailed off as he turned to look at Shila.

The pangolin had stepped away, but Paul had been too focused on coming up with a solution to notice what she was doing. She was mumbling something about viruses and anti-virals. There were some other medical-sounding words, but mixed in with them was what Paul was sure was programming of some sort. As he watched, Shila's hands moved away from her phone and it floated between them, light dancing between it and her moving fingers.

"Donal, what's going on?"

The squirrel didn't answer, watching for a few seconds. When he spoke, his voice caught. "Shi- Shila, are you sure now is the time?"

She didn't stop what she was doing, but Paul had a sense the question made her pause. When she spoke, there was none of the snarkiness Paul had come to expect from the Pangolin.

"After you told me I had to care about what was going on, are you telling me now's when I have to stop? Yes, now is the time. Get the staves to Grant. He'll know how to deal with them." She looked like her focus was about to return to her phone. "Oh Dona, for fuck's sake, eat something. You aren't broke and living off the streets anymore."

"Shila," Paul called, but she didn't respond. She was there, before him, but she also wasn't. She was lost in what she was doing. The light between her hands moved around the phone now, making patterns he didn't understand, except for the instinctive knowledge they weren't something any phone was capable of producing.

When he reached for her, Donal caught his hand and shook his head.

The light spread from her phone to over her hands, becoming brighter while at the same time not. As if it was light and whatever the conceptual opposite of light might be, that wasn't simply darkness. Within that light, he picked up details, other lights, and non-lights in small packets, moving almost too fast for him to make out, starting deep within the light and flying out, vanishing as it crossed the event horizon.

There was something, a flash of that mix of light and non-light. As Paul blinked the after effect away, he heard a phone drop to the floor.

When he could see properly again, Shila wasn't there. Where she'd stood, her

tracksuit was pooled on the floor, with her phone partially visible, poking out from under the fabric, the screen slowly shutting down.

# Storyboard, 1.5-13

It worked. Paul had trouble wrapping his mind around that.

What Shila had done had worked.

Living around magic people for the last few years, the main thing he realized, along with how many of them had a habit of overly depending on it, was that magic wasn't a magic solution.

Problems didn't get solved just because magic got thrown at them. No more than using Crisper protein against a genetic condition ensured success. Magic was a tool, nothing more. With the right knowledge, a tool could be made to do impressive things, but every tool had limits.

It didn't matter what you knew and how hard you worked at it. Crisper wouldn't give you a house, or Magic change the world.

Only Shila had done that.

Not that anyone realized the extent of what she'd done, or that she'd done it at all. As far as the world was concerned, five days ago, the sickness that had assaulted Denver and started popping up in cities around it... just vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. Tests were still happening, but as far as the doctors could tell, no one was infected anymore.

It had come on the heel of the strange glitch that had affected the technological world. Phones, televisions, even appliances, had suddenly started glowing and running odd code on their display. There was only a handful of recordings of the event on ancient videotape nearly too degraded to provide much information.

Paul was amazed there even had been that many people with equipment that old, on hand, and the presence of mind to grab it.

Magic couldn't change the world. That was something he'd been told and accepted.

Except for Practitioners, it seemed, if they were willing to sacrifice their lives. Then it looked like the world was within the range of what they could affect.

So why hadn't Merlin cured the sickness? He did the same sacrifice, and did it against the disease... but the genetic staff was still in play at the time, Nina was secretly there manipulating things, and Merlin might not have been able to use all the technology across the world to propagate the cure. But shouldn't he have been able to-

Stop, Paul thought to himself. Magic has limits, and using one instance where someone seemingly surpassed all of them to reanalyse everything was an unending spiral. Magic is done by people. Merlin was Merlin, and Shila was Shila. What they could do, decide to do, or even think of doing... all factors Paul can only guess at.

Paul ignored the squirrel seated next to him as Donal looked him over with far too much appreciation.

Paul brought up another news story, this one about a small news team who'd found themselves drowning in problems in the wake of the cure. That worldwide glitch had caused their private servers to dump their content on the web for everyone to see. Seemed that the Chamber with the coat of many colors did more than ensure only her version of the news spread. She had had a penchant for blackmail.

That was over.

Had Shila targeted her as part of curing the sickness? He wanted to think it was impossible, but then there was the other story he'd come across. A hare who'd died when she lost control of her car. The picture that was included was Nina, and the name in the article had Nina Haldi. The timing placed the accident in the middle of the glitch, and while none of the other vehicles had been affected by it, other than the screen misbehaving, hers had had the entire operating system wiped clean.

There was no mention of Merlin's cane in the article

Magic wasn't supposed to be that powerful.

Its use was also not supposed to lead to the user being consumed by it.

It was possible to die from overextension. Magic needed power and that came from the user, but from what he'd been told they had to work at it hard to make it happen. There were a lot of safeguards in the body and the mind designed to keep people alive.

Paul looked up from his phone, and Donal smiled at him. It was the kind of smile that said the squirrel had an idea that was probably a bad one, but it would be fun.

“Can I offer you a beverage?” the steward said, pushing the cart by Donal- he had the aisle seat. That broke the squirrel from his definitely lewd thoughts.

“No thank you.”

Paul also shook his head. He wasn't paying airline rates for a coffee, can of soda, or even a bottle of water. This would be a short flight in the grand scheme of things. He could survive.

That they were flying out of the country at all stunned Paul. Shila had told them to give the staves to Grant, but Paul had thought they'd call him and he'd come pick them up in between securing all the other staves the Chamber was after. Instead, Donal decided it couldn't wait and that they were flying to Reykjavik immediately.

Immediately ended up taking five days, and even then Paul was still damaged. Neither he nor Donal had a passport, so he'd expected the squirrel to magic them through airport security by lost corridors or causing the agents to be distracted so they could slip through.

Instead, it had been a series of phone calls, three accidental encounters, and a good deed, and both had ended up with passports in good working order. Donal insisted he couldn't make anything happen with his staff; that wasn't how it worked. But lost and hidden things seemed to include finding himself at the right place and the right time to make someone feel indebted to him.

Getting on a flight within hours of obtaining the passports had been much the same, a good deed and bumping into someone by accident. It had meant they were flying coach, but Paul didn't mind. They'd even kept the staves with them. The genetic one was in a case, and Donal was using the brass knuckle one as the cane it was fashioned to be. How it hadn't even attracted a glance from everyone, Paul attributed to magic.

He'd have preferred going back to San Francisco, but he felt bad about abandoning Donal to this, and the squirrel wanted Grant to have a look at him. The kangaroo had the most experience of anyone Donal knew in dealing with guys who suddenly found themselves being magical.

Paul could return to the search for a job afterwards, and a new car. He'd need one for his job, considering every biotech firm was outside the immediate city. Would Dietrich's company be outside the city too? If it was within the city, was being able to bus to work enough of an incentive to pick it over other offers he might have?

Donal was eying him again. Hadn't the squirrel gotten any the night before? He had come home with a woman, but Paul hadn't paid attention to what they had done or where in



the house they'd gone.

Not that Donal was bad-looking. He was a little on the thin side, and what Paul had seen of the man, he seemed to be a nice guy, but working at getting their passport hadn't left them much time to sit down and talk. And even if he owed Donal for having his memories back, the guy wasn't much more than an acquaintance, and that didn't work for Paul. Maybe once the staves were in Grant's hands, the two of them could talk for a while, get to know each other, see if they could be friends.

Paul didn't want to call Donal out on it, since he was just looking. So he went back to his phone and pulled up the chat his friends used. He went over the threads. Most were about the usual; plans for food, who was available to fuck, which club was the hottest these days. There was one about Thomas, since they shared a lot of friends. That one was rarely active because of what the rat was up to with Grant and the knowledge of how insecure anything on the internet was.

That thought gave Paul pause. How much of the security Thomas and their friends took for granted had been Shila's work? How much of that had been magical? With her being gone, how long until it failed?

He was halfway through typing a message telling his friends to be even more careful about what they said online, when he realized the stupidity of doing this when the Chamber could be listening in on his conversation, hoping to get Shila. He couldn't think of one way to let them know that didn't put him and Donal at risk.

There was a new thread about him.

Something about the message Shila had sent to that list of 'friends' had raised the hackles of everyone he knew who had received it.

Niel and Roland were vocal on it, asking for any information. Madoc said he had a friend looking into it, but no news yet. There were a lot of theories. Not everyone on the list knew about Shila. He barely did until meeting her. Madoc knew who she was and had provided assurances she'd take care of Paul.

That made Paul smile. If Madoc had ever met her, he wouldn't think of her as someone who took care of anyone.

He wished he could tell them he was fine. Maybe once they landed, Donal could do something and Paul could send a magical untraceable message to reassure everyone. Better, once he'd met with Thomas, the rat could pop into his brother's bedroom and tell him Paul was fine.

Shit, was his mom on that list?

He relaxed. No, she wasn't. As opened minded about Paul's life as she was, he didn't want her to know about the level of sex that happened among his friends. It might cause her to question what had happened to Paul's selective attitude when it came to bed partners. She's always approved of that.

They were worried, but at least it didn't look like any of them were mounting a search and rescue expedition. That was the problem with being friends with guys who'd already been through adventures. It was easy for them to consider another adventure as the answer to a lot of problems.

What else could he keep busy with until he was tired enough to sleep the rest of the flight?

As he had done since getting his doctorate, he pulled up his resume and went over it. There was always the suspicion that the lack of response was because it wasn't written well enough. He changed a word here, and one there. Once his adventure was over, he'd upload it to all the sites and hope for the best, again.

He reached the life experience section and smiled to himself. It wasn't like he could write what was happening now. What would he even put? Helped a nice lady save the world from a magical plague? That would cost him all the jobs he'd applied to.

He looked at the section, thinking about what he'd been through with Shila. Maybe he couldn't upload it, but he could put it down and make sure he remembered. It had been a life experience; and a good one, overall.

He started writing, considering the wording, simplified it, and settled on it.

Helped a friend save the world from the plague.

# Storyboard, 1.5-14

Paul stared out the window of the hotel and saw nothing.

The whole world on the other side of the windowpane was white.

Paul couldn't wrap his mind around the idea he was looking at a snowstorm in fucking June. Sure, he was in Iceland, but it was in the northern hemisphere so summer is still summer. Not to mention it certainly wasn't snowing yesterday when they landed.

This had not been what he'd expected to wake up to. Breakfast, since he'd made sure to set the alarm for the local morning, then wait for Donal to find something about Grant and Thomas's whereabouts.

Instead, when Paul woke up, the squirrel was nibbling on eggsa and pointing to the window when asked why he was still in.

"How is this possible?" Paul asked Donal and felt foolish. Magic, of course. Fuck if magic was being used here, the morning they'd landed, it could only be one group.

How had the Chamber tracked him and Donal? The only thing the golden tiger could think of was his phone. He hadn't messaged anyone, but he had been on the chat. Could the Chamber have traced him just from that? Donal had a talisman keeping them from being easily found, but electronic magic had been Shila's speciality, not Donal's. If the Chamber had someone else with an electronic staff, which magic would win?

He took his phone out, looking at it. He turned it over and wondered if this was one of the models where the battery could be removed. It would be safer to-

"No need for anything drastic," Donal said, appearing close before Paul and taking his hand. "We aren't there yet."

I wasn't," Paul started, then noticed the squirrel was looking between them. Paul was naked, but he'd gotten naked last night so Donal shouldn't be looking at him as if it was a revelation. "Donal," he said cautiously, "do you mind stepping out of my personal space?"

The squirrel looked up and his ears folded back in embarrassment. "Sorry." He

stepped away without letting go of Paul's phone and hand. Maybe they should take the time for find a club so Donal could work out his sexual need?

The squirrel shook himself and let go of Paul's hand. "Don't jump to the conclusion this is because of us."

"It seems sort of coincidental."

"Only our timing." He took his phone and showed Paul a weather page for Reykjavik. The map showed the storm covered more than half the country. "I'm not going to say there isn't a staff out there that couldn't do this, in the right hands. I'm not Grant; I don't know all that staves that exist. But I don't think anyone within the Chamber would have the kind of connection to their staves to do this overnight. It would take time to set up." He swiped to a new page, and a video of the weather for the region appeared, going back a week. The temperatures grew progressively colder with an increase in wind and snow.

"I've been looking through the last day's reports. The start of it caught the weather bureau by surprise, but it's been progressing as if it was a normal pattern after that."

"Only it isn't, is it?" Paul asked. "Not with Grant and Thomas in the area."

Donal nodded. "They've had the Chamber after them for a while. Seems like they're closing in."

Paul considered the timing. "Do you think this is because Shila called Grant?"

"I doubt it, but there's no way to know. All we can do is deal with this."

Paul chuckled. "And by this, you mean figure out where in Iceland the two of them are before the Chamber does? You realize that with the way things have been, there's no way they are somewhere in the city."

"Yeah. We're going to have to drive to wherever they are."

Paul looked at the window again. "You want us to drive in that?"

The squirrel nodded.

"Tell me you can afford to rent us whatever we'll need to deal with these kind of driving conditions."

#####

Donal couldn't. Neither could Paul.

At least they'd been able to buy winter clothing. The hotel's store dealt with enough tourists to stock appropriate wears and the weather was unpredictable enough they kept everything within reach, simply moving the winter stock to the basement during summer.

Paul kept his complaining to a minimum and he pushed through the whiteout conditions. He was from Minnesota, so he knew cold, but these last years in San Francisco Bay had gotten him used to a warmer climate. Donal stayed close to him, guiding them to only the squirrel knew.

Or, considering the way Donal's staff worked, maybe even he had no idea where they were going. Finding lost and hidden things did imply a lack of knowledge of where they were. They paused by a snowbank and Donal rummaged through it, coming up with something in hand, then got moving again.

Paul wanted to ask what he'd taken, but he worried opening his mouth would cause him to choke on all that snow.

When they finally had something to block the snow, Donal opened the door to the vehicle and climbed in. Paul followed and found himself seated behind the wheel of a rugged SUV. Donal offered him a wallet with something dangling out of it.

That was clearly not a phone.

Paul looked at the dash and didn't find a slot for a phone. How was he supposed to get it started? He turned the thin wallet over in his hand. Was this a talisman?

"The key goes in the ignition." Donal chuckled at Paul's incomprehension. "The key's what's sticking out. The teeth going in, with the flat part aimed at the center of the ignition."

Paul looked at the piece of metal attached to the leather wallet by a string. He could kinda think of it as a key, but its teeth were way more jagged than any physical key he's ever seen. He looked at the dash for something it would fit into.

Another chuckled issued from Donal.

"You're welcome to sit here and do this," Paul told him.

“It’s been years since I’ve driven anything. The ignition is on the steering column. It’ll be small and round, protruding. The slot will be on top.”

“How do you know about these?” Paul asked, looking and locating the ignition. He put the key in. Nothing happened. When Paul looked at him, Donal’s lips were tight with the effort not to smile. “Now what?”

It took him a few seconds to get it under control, but the squirrel finally spoke. “Turn it. And I know about it because these used to be how every vehicle worked.”

Paul turned it, and a series of explosions happened, shaking the SUV. When he let go of the key in surprise, they kept going.

He glared at Donal, but instead of laughing, he was holding onto the dash. “I thought you knew about these.”

“Read about them. Libraries are places to go when it gets too cold. Did a lot of reading there. I saw one when I was a kid, but never rode on.” He swallowed. “This is how they used to be powered, before the switch to electric.”

“So this is normal?” No wonder they’d moved to something better. “Why are they still using these here? Iceland isn’t a backward country.”

Donal looked calmer. “Fuel deals with very low temperatures better than batteries. Have you read the recommendations that come with all cars to remove one hour from the driving range for every ten degrees below thirty? Fuel vehicles don’t have that problem. Also, this one’s made to drive in this level of bad weather.”

“Which you just happened to find the keys of?” Paul said, placing his hands on the steering wheel. The way it vibrated, even though they weren’t moving, was slightly unnerving.

Donal shrugged. “It’s summer. They probably didn’t expect to need it and didn’t realize they’d misplaced the keys. They’re probably going to be pretty pissed when they come here and find us sitting in it. So it might be best if we get moving.”

They could explain the situation, get permission. Not steal it.

Yeah, Paul could see how that would go. Looking for friends when we have no idea where they were. Yeah, driving aimlessly seemed to be the plan. Sure anyone would be happy to lend them the only workable mode of transportation available for this weather.

He pressed the accelerator and was surprised when the wheels didn't spin needlessly. Slowly they drove until the deserted road.

"Where to?" Paul asked.

Donal consulted his phone. "We need to get on the forty-nine and leave the city." He pointed to the left. "It's in that direction."

Again, Paul was impressed with the traction as he turned in the direction. He'd driven cars supposedly built for Minnesota winters that had slid all over the place before finding traction.

"Any idea where we're going once we're out of the city?"

Donal shook his head. "I'm hoping that because of the storm, they've gotten lost."

"Donal, you do remember Thomas can teleport. How does a teleporter ever get lost?"

The flicker of worry was quick, then covered up, but it was enough to tell Paul that Donal had realized that potential problem with the plan.

Then the squirrel smiled. "They're not lost, they're hidden. From the Chamber, and the Chamber wouldn't keep this storm going if they'd found them."

Paul thought about it and decided that as something to hang all his hope on, it wasn't half bad.

# Storyboard, 1.5-15

“Are we there yet?” Paul asked after looking at the dash.

“Really?” Donal replied.

“We’re down to a quarter...” he searched for the right word, “reserve. I don’t know how long that’s going to last us.”

“I thought you were making that lame joke.”

“If it’ll make you feel more comfortable, I can start.” Paul smiled at the squirrel.

“Please don’t.”

Paul focused on what he could make out of the road again. The snow had stopped, and the sun was blinding as it reflected off the pristine powder. He was happy Donal had found a pair of sunglasses under his seat. The storm had come in waves, creating whiteouts, and then leaving him to maneuver on the hints as to where the road was by how the wind had packed it on one side and left the center slightly darker because it was thin enough to see the asphalt through it.

These breaks were exhaustion, Donal theorized, caused by fighting the natural weather patterns trying to reassert themselves. The Chamber weren’t as strong as practitioners, so the wielder needed breaks. Of course, since they weren’t bound to their staves they could pass it around, but according to Grant those Chamber lucky enough to have staves got paranoid about them, afraid that if someone else showed more attunement than them they’d lose the privilege.

“Do you have a sense of how far we are?” Paul asked. “If we run out of fuel, we don’t have much to survive on.”

Donal shook his head, then stopped. “That direction.” He pointed to the right.

Paul saw no indication there were roads, but he trusted the squirrel so he turned. They drove over something, then down, but the SUV kept going with barely any loss of speed. He did his best not to think about how hard it would be to get unstuck if they ended



up sliding off whatever he was driving on.

There had been little talking, as Paul had to focus on staying on the road and Donal kept looking at the assembly of nails, pennies, a toy car, what could be part of a soda can, and more that Paul couldn't identify. The squirrel's staff wasn't as large as those he'd seen, two hand widths and of an uneven thickness dictated by what was attached to it.

Because of the close-quarter and expected monotony of driving without knowing where they were going, Paul had expected to talk with Donal, but that would still have to wait until later. He found he was disappointed; he wanted to get to know him better.

"What do you know about factions?" Paul asked, surprised that was what came out, instead of something personal. Maybe, as much as he wanted to get to know the squirrel, he had other matters on his mind, like what faction he belonged to.

"Not a lot," Donal answered, not looking away from his staff. "I hear stories, more now that I'm a Practitioner, but I know better than to just believe them. I'm not sure how useful those will be in narrowing what faction you're part of."

"What happens if I end up in a faction that's opposed to the Society?"

The squirrel shrugged. "I don't know that anyone is anyone's enemies on that level. From what Grant told me, factions mostly stick to their own. There are some recent attempts at getting cooperation going, but they've all been on their own for so long that it isn't easy. Animosity is more on the one-on-one level."

"What's it been like for you, being a practitioner?"

"Knowing Thomas changed my life more than being a practitioner. I expected even if I wasn't magic, he'd still have made sure I got off the street. The only real change I've had to make because of my staff was to make sure to stay off the Chamber's radar. I thought I was doing a good job, but having Nina show up at the house proves me wrong."

"What are you going to do about it?" Paul asked, then focused on his driving as the storm started up again.

"I haven't worked that out yet. I'm going to focus on this problem, and then work on hiding myself again." He closed his eyes and canted his head. "Make a left, now."

Paul turned without question.

“I think we’re getting close.”

#####

They weren’t close enough.

The SUV sputtered and came to a stop. Donal still said they were close, so they got out and walked, Paul holding onto the squirrel’s arm so they wouldn’t get separated. He had to rely on him because this time the storm didn’t seem to want to let up. If anything, it seemed to grow stronger, as if they were approaching its epicenter.

Until, an unknowable amount of time later, they walked out of it and into an encampment.

Paul pulled Donal back before anyone noticed them, and they were in the storm again. A line marked it, caused by the wind building drifts. He made out the tents, as well as jeeps and SUVs, and more military-looking vehicles, along with many people. He couldn’t tell if any of them had staves, but there was no one else they could be.

Beyond them, Paul made out the entrance to a cavern.

“We can’t go through them,” he told the squirrel. As much as he wanted to believe magic could solve a lot of problems, that went for their enemy as well. Even if Donal’s staff could conceal them, they’d have the place covered with talismans set to go off if someone tried to sneak in.

Instead of saying anything, Doanl moved parallel to the storm line.

#####

When Donal pulled Paul out of the storm, they were only a few steps from a crack in the rock with melted snow where drift had attempted to form. Inside, the heat seemed stifling after being frozen for so long.

He unzipped his coat, and the squirrel looked in his direction, then looked him over and opened his coat too. As Donal reached for his belt, he shook himself and looked deeper into the cavern.

Paul wished they had talked more because he, too, was getting to where getting laid would be fun. He wasn’t the sex machine any of his Society friends were, but because they were his friends it was rare he went more than a day without. This made what, a week, a little

more, since Dietrich? Trevor would have been desert the day Shila drafted him to drive her out of San Francisco.

Yeah,, this was the longest in a very long time without having sex.

“This way,” Donal said, and Paul followed him. “We’re a lot closer.”

But not that close, Paul realized when Donal turned and nearly walked into a wall. He had a sense of where their friends were, but not which of the tunnels would get there. He was more of a compass than a ‘you are here’ point on a map.

Did this connect to the entrance the Chamber was guarding? Did they have people inside, also looking for Grant and Thomas? If his friend found the staff before Paul reached him, would they teleport away immediately? Paul stopped thinking. Looking at all the ways this could go wrong wouldn’t help him. They were going to find Thomas and Grant, then they’d get the staff, and then they would go home.

This would succeed, it had too, otherwise-

He walked right into a Chamber search party. Six of them, stepping back, looking as stunned at seeing them here as Paul felt. How had he not heard them... he noticed the foam tied to their boots. They had talismans to sneak around, Paul had Donal. No wonder no one had heard the others.

Paul reacted first and punched the woman before him. She blocked and reached for a set of cuffs at her belt. Paul tried to hit her again, but this time he didn’t have surprise on his side; at least staying on the offensive kept her from easily putting those cuffs on him.

He stepped around her and finally planted an elbow that sent her down, only to be hit by another. Paul’s head spun, but he kept his footing. When he faced him, another whipped out a feathered wand and pointed it at Paul.

The golden tiger leaped to the side and kept moving up until he had a hand against the ceiling. From there, he saw Donal pulling a set of keys out of the pocket of the man trying to grab him. The squirrel still had a lot of layers under his coat and the doberman couldn’t seem to find purchase.

Paul put his feet under- over- him and propelled himself at the dog, slamming a shoulder into him, then bouncing off, trying to stop his uncontrolled spin.

Then he crashed to the ground and before he got to his feet, something closed around his wrist. The woman he’d tangled with first grinned as she pulled on the other half of the

handcuffs. Paul rolled to his feet and punched her as she looked from him to the cuff in her hand, stunned.

A shot fired and Paul ducked, then he ran at Donal, who was tangling with the doberman again. He kicked the legs out from under him and grabbed the squirrel's arm, turning to run the way they'd come, only to find a gorilla there, grinning as he pointed a gun at them.

Then someone dropped on the gorilla out of nowhere, the rat kicking and hitting before disappearing.

Paul turned in time to watch a kangaroo throw something at a chinchilla, and the dog found himself wrapped in layers upon layers of tape. Grant kicked him unconscious, while Thomas appeared behind a giraffe, kicked their legs out, then helped their head reach the hard ground faster.

The cavern fell silent, except for Paul and Donal's panting.

"What the fuck do the two of you think you're doing?" Grant demanded and looked ready to add more, but Paul was suddenly busy with an arm full of rat.

Thomas's tongue pushed into Paul's muzzle and they both moaned. The golden tiger's tongue played with the rat's while his hand dropped and squeezed the ass. Thomas ground his crotch against Paul. They were both hard, and after more than a week, Paul was more than ready to fuck his friend until-

"What," Grant demanded as he pulled Thomas away, "Do you think you're doing? This isn't the time to make out. We have the Chamber on our ass, the fucking staff to find, and now these two idiots to look after. I get you Society guys can't keep it in your pants, but I really thought you understood the danger we're in, Thomas. If not, I'm more than happy to-"

"Shila has Apotheosized," Donal said.

Grant looked at the squirrel. He opened his mouth, closed it. Tried again, and again. Pain crossed his face, which was shoved aside by anger. Then the cursing started.

# Storyboard, 1.5-16

Paul watched as the kangaroo just stopped cursing, his face growing hard.

“What happened?” Grant demanded.

Donal looked at Paul, who shook his head. This felt like it was for a Practitioner to explain. He held Thomas as the squirrel explained the Chamber’s attack on Denver, Merlin being taken out, and Shila sacrificing herself once she understood something about the sickness that still escaped him. She had saved the rat on at least one occasion, and they had become as close to friends as Shila let anyone be.

Of course all that was the end of the journey, so Paul had to go back and fill in the beginning. Her request for his help, the Chamber’s attack on her, and how they’d ended up in Denver after the news story. He had to calm his best friend during parts of that; Paul had got through it all OK, mostly because of Shila.

And with that all covered, Donal wrapped up with her request they find Grant so he could handle the staves they’d taken from the two Chamber.

“Where are they?” Grant asked. “Tell me you didn’t leave them in the car that got you here.”

“I’m not an idiot, Grant,” Donal replied. “They’re in the mail.”

The kangaroo stared at the squirrel. “What? You mailed them? To who? You know the Chamber’s going to find out where they’re going and-”

“You have any idea how easy it is for packages to get lost in international shipping?” Donal asked. “How easy it is for me to ensure that it happens?”

That seemed to mollify the kangaroo. “Alright. Where are they going and when do we need to be there to retrieve them?”

“No idea.” Donal rolled his eyes. “Things can’t be lost if I know where they’re going. Defeats the purpose. I should be able to ensure they make their way to me once we want them.”

“Should,” Grant stated in a tone that Paul felt was gearing up for another argument.

“Thomas,” Donal called.

“What?” the rat stiffened, and Paul noticed he’d been watching him instead of the conversation. Well, Thomas was Society, so that explained the lust he was pushing down.

“Remind me just how much control Grant here had over his staff, back when he had one.”

“He, err...” Thomas looked from one to the other as if no matter what he said, he’d be betraying a friend.

“I get your point, Donal,” Grant finally admitted. “Only the real problem is that now I have to make sure you survive this idiotic idea of Shila’s; because while you think you should be able to retrieve them, I know without a doubt that without you, there is no way I’ll ever get them out from where ever they’re now lost.”

“Actually,” Thomas said. “I have a way around that. I have the sensory phrase. So, me and Paul can fuck to ensure this place is imprinted. Then I take them both back to the Denver house, Paul fucks me there because I’m going to need it, then I bring him back and he fucks me once we arrive because there’s not way I’m going to be familiar enough with this place to be functional with at least two fucks to recharge me.”

Grant stared at Thomas. “No. What are you thinking? We’re not splitting up. The Chamber’s going to be looking for Donal after what he was part of. And don’t even bring up one of the other landing points. They blew up those you had in San Francisco Bay, so they have to know about the others and are watching them.”

Thomas bit his lower lips, and for a moment he looked much younger than he and Paul were. “Right, sorry. I know other phrases, and Paul can get a lot of cum out of me, so I can write a few on Donal so he’ll be protected.”

“Grant,” Paul said, trying not to stare at his best friend. “Tell me you haven’t been starving Thomas of sex?”

“Of course no. We haven’t exactly had the time since getting in here, but it’s only been ten hours at the most.”

“What?” Thomas said, grinning lewdly at Paul. “I missed you.”

“He’s here now,” Grant said, “So we need to go back to our search before the Chamber either finds it or us. And since you’re here, Donal, hopefully you can help since this staff is fucking well hidden.”

“Sure, but I’m going to need something to go on. With the Chamber around, just looking for a hidden staff is going to get us walking straight into them.”

“Right...” Grant hesitated. “The thing is, all I had to go by were some old translation from older Gaelic text, and they weren’t exactly in great condition when we found them and I can’t be-”

“It’s the Lady of the Lake,” Thomas said, a grin finally wiping the lust off his face.

“Yeah,” Grant said, embarrassed.

“As in the legend of King Authur?” Paul asked, while Donal stared at the kangaroo.

“I know, right,” Thomas said. “I couldn’t believe she was real either. Makes you wonder if the rest of the legends are true too.”

“Don’t blow this out of proportion,” Grant said. “For all we know, the translation isn’t entirely accurate, or she was added to the stories because-”

“Wow, another story that’s real,” Paul said.

“Another?” Grant asked.

“Yeah, me and Shila came across a Chamber with Joseph’s Coat of Many Colors on the way to Denver. She seemed to be involved in manipulating the media.”

Grant sighed. “Webber’s staff has no direct connection to biblical times; it’s unclear if he created it or found it, but it contains polyester so it can’t be older than the 1930s.”

“Okay, but still, now we have the Lady of the Lake. Tell me you ran that by Niel.” Paul looked from Thomas to Grant to- his eyes stopped on Donal, who was looking in the distance.

The kangaroo followed the golden tiger’s gaze. “Donal, you have it?”

“I have... something.”

‘How far?’

‘I’m... not sure. Deeper, I can tell that.’

‘What about these people?’ Paul asked, gesturing at all the knocked out Chamber agents surrounding them.

‘No time,’ Grant said. ‘They’re going to be out for a while. Our best bet is to get to the staff, have Thomas take us out of here, and then deal with whoever the Chamber has watching that location.’

‘I’m not going to be able to keep us hidden,’ Donal said. ‘This is like nothing I’ve had to find before.’

‘Staves will do that to you,’ Grant replied. ‘Leave dealing with the Chamber and their goons to us. You just get us to the staff, and don’t you fucking think of over-stressing yourself. I already lost one friend too many.’ Grant pulled stuff out of his pockets and started making something.

‘Is that going to be effective?’ Paul asked. ‘You’re not the one with the staff about hiding.’

‘Maybe not, but I’m the only one here who’s spent years evading the Chamber.’ He grinned. ‘I’d like to think I’ve gotten pretty damned well acquainted with the concept of not being found.’

‘That’s why we’ve been in so many fights recently,’ Thomas whispered.

#####

Paul punched the otter in the muzzle as hard as he could, and he dropped. The other Chamber goon was also unconscious. And Grant was helping Donal back to his feet after shoving him out of the way when the fight started. It was the third one. Grant’s talisman hadn’t proved effective at hiding them, but he had one to warn of approaching people, so they’d been ready and hid them hard before they could react.

Thomas took care of their phones, popping in, grabbing them, and popping out. That way they’d ensured no call for help went out. Grant and Paul had taken care of the rest. The kangaroo had added talismans to Paul’s jacket that made him hard to hit and his punches more effective. Donal remained out of the fights; the worry was that he’d lose the trail if he dropped his focus.



Thomas broke another phone. “You know, it’s only a question of time before someone notices the number of people who aren’t responding anymore.”

“It’s why we need to keep going,” Grant replied. “Donal?”

“We’re closer.”

The kangaroo’s muttered reply wasn’t flattering, but he nodded and they started walking again.

The caverns turned into a mix of stone and ice, some of them letting diffused light in, indicating they weren’t that far from the edge of the- glacier? Mountain? Paul didn’t know what something that was made of both was called. The light faded and they had to rely on Grant and Thomas’s phones, which were powered by talisman, to see their way.

When Donal stopped, they were in a larger cavern with a ceiling that was lost in the darkness. The wall they were by was ice in the shape of a waterfall.

“It’s... here,” Donal said, not sounding certain and looking at the frozen waterfall.

“I’m not seeing a staff,” Thomas said.

“Lady of the Lake,” Grant replied, shining his light on the frozen water. “More than likely it’s in the ice.”

“Do any of you have something to melt that?” Paul asked. “Because I didn’t bring a pickax.”

“I can probably manage something,” Grant mused. “A lot of stuff carry heat within their concept.”

“Or we could use the provided magical unlock,” Thomas said, shrinking his light on the imprint of a hand melted in the ice. He put his hand on it only to rapidly pull it away, cursing. “Never mind, it’s a trap.” He shook his arms. “I’m glad that isn’t like picking up one of your staves. Still hurt like a bitch.”

Donal studied the imprint, then placed his hand in it. When he took his off, it was slowly. “Nothing.”

“Paul, try it,” Grant instructed. “Maybe she set it so it had to be someone outside the

factions that retrieved it. It would ensure it wasn't someone from the Chamber who got their hands on it."

"Yeah, about that," Paul said, trailing off. Grant just stared at him as the implication hit.

"You too?" Thomas said, sounding far too eager.

"What the fuck is it with Minneapolis?" Grant demanded. "Is there some magnet for fouldings? No, that's not a thing. Fuck, I hope that's not a thing."

"You want to try it?" Donal asked Grant.

"If it didn't work for you, it isn't going to work for me," the kangaroo replied. "We're just going to have to melt the ice." He began searching through his pockets.

A flicker of motion caught Paul's attention in his peripheral vision, and he stepped out of the way of the punch, hitting back before he considered what he was doing. The fox staggered back, seemingly surprised.

More people stepped out of the darkness, but Paul couldn't let himself be distracted as the fox came at him. Paul moved easily, the talisman Grant had give him making this feel like a dance where he was the only one who knew the steps. When he saw the opening and struck, the pain was clear on the fox's face.

He caught a glance of Thomas fighting with someone and Paul wondered why he wasn't teleporting out of reach, then suffered for the distraction when the fox landed a punch of his own. Paul planted two punches in succession and the fox went down.

He turned to watch Thomas plant a knee in the woman's stomach, then an elbow to her face, and she went down. The rat saw him and grinned, raising his arm. He had something metallic around his wrist.

Paul opened his mouth to ask what it was, but a howl had him looking around in fear. It was there, in the shadows, ready to jump him, to tear him apart, feast on his-

Something tackled him and Paul lashed out mindlessly, trying to get them off, to save himself. They had him, held his face against the hard ground when the howl ended and he was able to think again. He tried to move, but whoever held him was too strong.

"I told you I would find you again," a deep voice said. "We are the same. You should

not have fled.”

Paul was pulled to his feet by a muscular mouse, and turned so he could see the monster of a wolf glaring down at Grant, a behemoth larger than even Dietrich clad in military fatigues and a metallic collar. The kangaroo was restrained by a pair of large mooses, Thomas was held at gunpoint, and Donal had his hands over his head in surrender.

“You can’t think I’d want to hang around you with the company you keep,” the kangaroo replied. “Ore are you being kept?”

“Ouch,” a vole said, stepping into the light. “That hurts. GW is with us of his own volition, isn’t that right?”

“Sure Kingsley, take off his collar and let’s find out.”

“How about it, GW?” the vole asked. “Why don’t you take the collar off?”

Instead of replying, the giant wolf sniffed the air, then walked around Grant and his captors.

“GW,” the vole said in annoyance, “I asked-”

“I like my collar,” the wolf replied, distracted.

“What are you doing?”

“There is...” the wolf scented the air again. “A smell.” He stepped close to the waterfall and looked at where the handprint was.

The vole shrugged and pulled out a revolver. “I suppose it’s better this way. Now he doesn’t have to see his precious Grant die.” He aimed it at the kangaroo’s head at the same moment the wolf placed his hand on the handprint.

The quake was sudden and sent the man holding Paul to the ground, while the golden tiger danced to remain standing. The snap of ice followed as people got to their feet and Paul ran for the vole before he could aim at Grant from the ground.

He stopped as the waterfall broke apart. Behind the cloudy ice there was a woman held in a clear block of ice. Paul swallowed as he noticed that the gossamer white dress the seal wore was moving as if in a soft breeze.

Or, he realized as the seal opened her eyes, underwater.

The jet of water hit him hard enough Paul blacked out immediately.

# Storyboard, 1.5-17

Paul winced at the brightness as he came awake. “Turn down the spotlight,” he mumbled, putting a hand up to provide shade.

“You’re going to have to wait a few hours,” Donal replied.

“More than a few,” Grant said, “this is Iceland in the summer. The sun’s up for a long while.”

Paul sat and looked for threats. The last thing he remembered was fighting. No, they’d been captured, and the vole had been about to put a bullet in the kangaroo’s head.

“How?” he asked, looking at the grove they were seated in. A fire was going in the center, but in no way did that account for the warmth. Or how dry he was. He’d been hit by water. He should be freezing in the dripping clothes. His shirt wasn’t even damp and his pants...

He sighed. “Thomas, where are my pants?”

“Here,” the rat replied, raising them. “I had to take them off to make sure you weren’t injured when Wassa threw you around with the rest of us.”

“Can I get them back?”

That Thomas hesitated told Paul that whatever was going on with his best friend was still there, but at least he wasn’t so far gone as to take advantage of him while he was unconscious. He’d be feeling it if he had been topped by the rat.

“Come on, this isn’t a locker room or a bedroom. Or one of those high Society meetings you love to tell me about.”

“We actually have those clothed,” Thomas protested, “...well, to start,” he added at the looks all the assembled men gave him. Thomas had taken to the Society as if he’d been born to it, sex as often as he could and clothing as little as possible. Only Roland was more into it, and Thomas’s brother has the excuse of multiple remembered versions of a life where that was how he’d been raised.

The rat threw the tiger his pants, and Paul put them on before joining the others by the fire.

“Ma’am,” Paul greeted her. “I’m guessing we have you to thank for no longer being prisoners of the Chamber.” As soon as the words were out, Paul felt stupid. What were the odds a woman who had been buried in ice for centuries understood him?

“I am indeed the one responsible,” the seal answered in a slightly stilted and formal English. Paul stared and noticed the phone hanging around her neck with copper wires taped to it along with pages from a dictionary? He peered. An English to Icelandic one.

That it was his phone they’d used surprised him more than whatever else had been involved. What did copper wire have to do with communicating?

“It was the only one not used for something else,” Grant said. “Don’t worry, no permanent modifications.”

Paul nodded. “I’m guessing you weren’t expecting a living Practitioner when you started on this quest.” He wondered what her staff was. It had to be the dress, since it was all he could see. It was certainly less garish than the coat of many colors.

“Can’t say that I was.”

“How did we end up outside? And where’s the Chamber?”

“Wassa is responsible for both,” the kangaroo answered, “but further explanations will have to wait. There are more important things I have to discuss with her.” He focused on her and lowered his voice. Not enough Paul couldn’t listen to the conversation if he wanted to, but it was indicated they expected some privacy.

And he had someone to check in on.

He moved closer to Thomas. “What happened? Why are we still here and not... at any of your landing zones?”

Thomas raised his hand and one half of a set of handcuffs was around his wrist. Paul raised his. Thomas’s was silvery, while his was steel gray.

“It’s keeping me from teleporting,” Thomas said. “Handcuffs, so something around the concept of not escaping. Grant said he can take it off, but he wants to have that talk

before we go anywhere.”

“You think the woman who put this on me thought I was you?”

Thomas looked Paul over with a smile, which quickly turned lewd. “Trust me, no one would confuse a hot body like yours for mine.”

“Settle down, Thomas,” Paul said preemptively. “We aren’t alone.”

The rat leaned in closer and whispered. “They are kinda of busy.” He placed a hand on the inside of Paul’s thigh. “I doubt they’d notice.”

The golden tiger chuckled. “They’d notice. How exactly did Wassa get us out; do you know?”

“You should have seen her,” Thomas said. “She’s really on the ball for a lady that’s been frozen in water for six hundred years. Anyone openly aggressive, she just washed away. She said they might reach the ocean with enough time. Anyone unconscious she immobilized, and those of us who were prisoners, she questioned. Well, the questions had to wait until Grant made a translation talisman.”

“My phone.”

“That’s the second version. The first was Donal’s translation dictionary, copper wires, and broken glasses. It didn’t work well, because she doesn’t speak Icelandic, but he was able to get enough across to explain you were with us, and who on the ground was with the Chamber. Then the rest joined them on their merry trip to the ocean. He borrowed your phone once she dried it, along with you. Electronics are his least favorite things to work with, but access to the internet comes with so many concepts he can tap into that and use it so they could keep talking. That’s about when you woke up.” Thomas leaned in and Paul readied himself to tell him to stop. “If you ask me, she has the hots for Grant. She can’t stop watching him. It’s like she’s been waiting for him for a while.”

Paul opened his mouth to ask... something, but Thomas’s nibbling on his neck chased everything away. When he turned to tell him to stop, Thomas kissed him, and Paul responded, their tongues mingling as they fell back.

He grabbed the rat’s ass as he rolled on his back, and he felt Thomas grin in the kiss. His shirt lifted as a hand sneaked under it and he gasped as Thomas pinched his nipple. Paul undid the rat’s tail strap and put his hand in the pants, getting a solid handful of furry ass.

He was so going to-

“Excuse me,” Grant interrupted.

“Come back in an hour,” Thomas said between panting. “We’re busy.”

They were busy, Paul realized, but it shouldn’t be with having sex. With effort, he pushed Thomas off him.

“Okay,” the golden tiger panted. “That settles it. I have to be Society. I’m not normally that needy.”

“When was the orgy?” Grant asked.

“What?” Paul had trouble working out the rest of the phrase.

“Even if we assumed you could get fully initiated with only one, it still takes thirteen guys to do it. You had one of those recently?” The kangaroo offered Paul his hand.

Paul took it and was on his feet. “Not since Roland’s initiation.”

Grant patted his shoulder. “Then you’ve just been too long without sex. Believe it or not, you don’t have to follow a sex-addicted god to really want sex.”

“Did you just insult a god?” Paul asked. “And what about Niel? He didn’t need thirteen guys.”

“No tigers among the Survivors,” Thomas said. “But there’s the Orrs.”

“Who are Society,” Grant said, “so still no dice. Don’t worry, we’ll figure out which faction you’re with when we have the time. Until then, you and Thomas can knock boots once we’re in Denver.”

“Knock boots?” Paul asked.

“Do the nasy, get busy, the horizontal-”

“I got the picture. I just didn’t think you used expressions like that.”

The kangaroo smiled. “What can I say? I’m a man of many talents.”

Paul looked at Thomas. “You never mentioned that side of him.”



The rat seemed to have trouble focusing on them until he shook himself. When he stood, he barely caught his pants in time to keep them from falling, and Paul thought that was sad.

“I’m going to need you to take this off.” Thomas offered Grant the cuffed wrist.

“Is Denver wise?” Paul asked. “The Chamber had stuff happening there when me and Donal left. Even with Shila bringing the sickness to a stop, I doubt they’re all gone.”

“With me, Donal, and Wassa there,” Grant said as he looked the cuff over, “We’ll be able to deal with anyone they send to the house before they’re within a hundred feet of it.” He took something from a pocket, did something to the cuff Paul didn’t see, and it came off.

“That’s it?” Thomas asked in surprise. “I could have done that myself.”

“I didn’t know there were no magical safeties until I inspected it.” Grant took Paul’s wrist and looked at the cuff. “They’re made to keep Thomas locked in place, but it’s best to take yours off too, in case it keeps you from coming along. It would be a bitch to have to come back for you.” He inserted a small pry bar in the keyhole.”

“You know,” Thomas said. “Maybe me and Paul should fuck now, with the sensory script. You know, just in case one of you accidentally stays behind. That way I can come back and-”

“No, Thomas. The four of us are nowhere near your limit. Fuck, you’ve been to Denver often enough I doubt you’ll feel it.” With a click, the cuff opened, and the kangaroo pocked it.

“Alright,” Thomas said, sounding more lucid. “Gather up close and take hold.”

Paul stepped to the rat and placed a hand on his shoulder. Thomas moved an arm around the golden tiger’s back and squeezed his ass.

“Kids,” Grant said with exasperation.

“You’re just jealous, old man,” Thomas replied.

“Of your lewd and obsessive sexual-”

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“-desire? Absolutely-”

Paul went flying from the kangaroo’s shove just before the gunfire registered. He saw frenzied movement in the too crowded bedroom. There was another gunshot, and a hole appeared in the wall next to Paul. He dropped. He saw Thomas blink out and back in behind a bear, who then cried out in pain as he fell backwards.

The other three were quickly taken down by Grant and Wassa, who, even without using water, was dangerous.

The door burst open, and a chimpanzee rushed in. “What is-”

Thomas slammed the lamp he’d picked up from the dresser into the chimp’s stomach, then the side of the head, making the simian drop like the rest.

“That was the guy who had the brass knuckle staff,” Paul said, getting to his feet.

Grant looked at Donal.

“It’s in the mail,” the squirrel answered.

“Okay, this changes things,” the kangaroo said. “Donal, Wassa, we focus on materials. Thomas, Paul, tie these guys up, and please stay focused. Now is not the time to start fucking. If they’re in here, the Chamber has to have more outside. Thomas, we need somewhere safe for you to take us.”

“Argentine,” the rat answered, ripping the electrical core off the lamp and using it to tie the chimpanzee’s hands. “The Medeiros aren’t going to let anyone storm their hotel.”

Paul ripped sheets into strips and they used them to bind the others. Once they were done, they offered to help carry supplies, but Grant and donal already had shoulder bags filled with anything they thought they could use. Wassa had drifted off, getting slightly mesmerized by all modern items and the concepts they represented.

They hurried through the house, not wanting to raise their voice and risk attracting the attention of whoever was outside. They had already been lucky enough the gunshots hadn’t brought anyone running in.

They found the seal in the living room, looking at her reflection on the screen on the

wall.

Grant opened his mouth, but a knock at the door froze him silent.

Paul looked at the windows. The curtains were closed and heavy. The Chamber outside shouldn't be able to see them.

Wassa looked at them, then at the door.

Grant shook his head emphatically, mouthing what Paul thought was "it's bad" at her, but she ignored him. Thomas appeared behind her, but his arms went through her as if she was made of water.

She opened the door, and the cheetah in the suit standing on the other side looked at her, then around her at Grant, Donal, Thomas, and Paul.

He gave a satisfied nod. "Good, you're all here. Now," he continued as his tone hardened, "Will one of you tell me why the fuck He's been filling my dreams with the four of you for the last week?"

# Storyboard, 1.5-18

With a yelp that sounded too scared to come from his best friend, Thomas vanished. The cheetah looked where the rat had been.

“That answers one of you.” He looked at the seal. “Ma’am, I’d appreciate it if you let me in.”

“Don’t,” Grant said, as Wassa stepped out of the way.

The cheetah entered, immediately followed by a bear, a wolf, and a raccoon wearing gray and black body armor. There was a methodicalness to how they surveyed the room and those in it.

“I told you to stay outside,” the cheetah exasperated.

“Sorry, sir,” the bear said. “Mister Marrows was quite descriptive in what he’d do to us if we let you go into this alone.”

“Fine. You stay,” he told the bear. “You two, out. We don’t need to scare them any more than they already are.”

Paul looked at the others. Like him, they looked more worried than scared. Except for Wassa, who was watching the cheetah with curiosity.

When neither the raccoon nor wolf moved, the cheetah eyed them. “Do you really want me to remove you myself? Alarm is here; I’m not alone. Tom’s over-protectiveness is dealt with. Out.”

They reluctantly left, and the bear closed the door.

“Now,” the cheetah said. “My name is Denton Brislow. While I don’t know you individually, I’ve gathered the basics. Except for you, Ma’am. I know you are part of the magical community, since He’s shown me some of the things you did before arriving here, but I was unable to discover more.”

“That might be because Wassa was on ice for a lot of years,” Paul offered.

“Centuries,” Grant added, reluctantly.

“Right,” the cheetah replies, exasperated rather than shocked. “With that covered, it still leaves the question of why He’s seen fit to pester my nights with the lot of you.”

“I may be able to enlighten you,” Wassa said.

“I would appreciate it,” Denton responds, before glancing around. “Do you mind if I make space for us to sit?”

“Shit,” Donal muttered. “Sorry. I never considered having people over.” He headed for the couch, but the containers of materials raised on their own. The squirrel first looked at Grant, who was staring at the cheetah, then at Wassa.

“My way’s faster,” the cheetah said, and more chairs were cleared. The boxes and bags were deposited around the living room. “You,” he told the bear, “are staying by the door. The price for not doing what your boss tells you.”

“It sounded like his boss is this Mister Marrows,” Paul said, taking a seat.

“No, he’s just the guy who doesn’t think I can survive five minutes without him watching my ass. And since he’s out of the country at the moment, he’s making my life hell by proxy.” He let out a breath as he dropped into a loveseat. “Wassa, if you’d be so kind.”

The seal sat at one end of the couch, and Grant took the other.

“I must go back in time to explain properly. But first, do you know of the Practitioners and the Chamber?”

“I have heard the names. I’ve had people give me a rundown of who they are, but I’ve yet to encounter anyone from that faction.”

“We’re not-” Grant started, then closed his mouth.

The cheetah waited, then nodded to Wassa.

“This story begins before there was the Practitioner or the Chamber. It was only those of us who channeled the creativity of the world. We made magic by making items and imbuing them with meaning. Grant tells me those are now called talismans.” She tapped the

phone at her neck. “This is such. A talisman around the idea of communicating.”

“It was eventually discovered some of us had made a talisman so strong that it and its power remained once the crafter died. More so, the talisman would draw someone with a similar aptitude to itself. Those are what became known as our staves.”

Donal stopped reaching for a pocket when the cheetah glanced in his direction, then resumed the motion and pulled out his staff.

“Out of fear of what the uninitiated might do with such powerful items, it was decided caretakers should be assigned to look after them and educated whoever the staff drew to itself. In time, they would come to be called the Chamber.”

This snagged Grant’s attention, who up till now was observing Denton much like Paul as observing the group as a whole, giving Wassa the kangaroo’s full attention.

“There were ups and downs. Arguments and alliances. We are like everyone else, prone to our opinion and the desire to see them adopted by others. One such opinion was that the gods who bestowed magic on those who followed them did so by stealing from the creativity of the world.”

The cheetah tilted an ear but kept his opinion to himself.

“Then, it was decided by the Chamber that this blasphemy could not be allowed to continue. That this theft needed to be put to an end. They devised a plan by which they could use the strength of all staves, assembled and still in use, to create a ceremony that would destroy all those thieves and return that creativity where it belonged.”

The cheetah chuckled. “Sorry, but really? Have some magic to kill all the gods? Return their power to your god?”

“That isn’t how it works for us,” Grant said with heavy exasperation, then raised a hand to forestall the protest. “I get it. You follow a god, so do the people in the other factions. Do you really think absolutely everyone out there has to operate under that one principle?”

That seemed to give the cheetah pause. “Alright. I’ll grant you that I don’t happen to know everything about everything, so I’m not in a position to claim you’re wrong. But that the power of all gods comes from...” he gestures around them.

“The universe,” Grant finished. “No, we don’t believe that.” When Wassa didn’t immediately agree with him, he stared at her.

“I do not believe,” she said cautiously, “that my belief as to where the gods get their power from is relevant to this story. I will say that by the time I became involved, the purpose of the ceremony was no longer to simply return that power to the world, the universe as you say. After all, without a mind guiding, protecting, that power, what would stop others from stealing it again and making themselves gods? It was decided by the Chamber that one of them would become the mind and hold all that power.”

“Making themselves a god,” the cheetah said flatly.

“It sounded as arrogant to many of us as it does to you,” Wassa said. “And when the Chamber was no longer content with convincing us their goals were good, or at least for the greater good, they began taking our staves by force.”

She fell silent, and Paul realized it was possible her dress wasn't her staff. Grant didn't have a staff; he'd sacrificed it to save Thomas and his friends. Maybe she had lost hers in a less noble way.

“They won. How could they not? By then, for each of us with a staff, there were dozens of them charged with looking after the staves of the fallen. Once they had all of them, they attempted their ceremony.”

“Which failed,” Paul said, “Obviously.”

“Catastrophically,” she added. “The volcano by which they did it erupted, sending dark clouds across the sky that would not dissipate.”

“That was in Iceland?” Grant asked, thoughtfully.

“It was. For months, the skies were black. Anywhere I went, the weather was cold. People starved.”

“You're talking about the dark ages,” the cheetah said.

“The time was dark, yes.”

“Almost two years of ash in the sky,” Grant said. “There's heavy debate as to what volcanic eruptions caused it, with the heaviest theories being a combination of one in Iceland and at least one elsewhere in the world. Could what the Chamber did set off other volcanoes around the planet?”

“I do not know,” she said, aghast. “They were attempting to destroy gods. The ideas needed to do such a thing should be unthinkable.”

“The concept of destruction on that level could have blown the world apart,” Donal said with a shudder. “If all we got were two volcanoes, even four, we can count ourselves lucky.”

“Or the gods stepped in,” the cheetah said thoughtfully.

“They don’t get involved,” Grant said dismissively, and the cheetah chuckled. “You imply that you traveled, Wassa. I thought that what the Chamber did resulted in you being trapped where we found you.”

She shook her head. “I... survived... I was changed. I do not understand how it happened. When my staff was rendered in the ceremony... most died. The destruction of their staves ripping something from them, but a few of us...” she shook herself. “The dark age was still ongoing when the surviving Chamber analyzed what happened; why it went wrong. They decided the mistake had been to attempt it without the proper number of staves. I do not know how many they believe they need, but it was enough that they decided they could not afford to wait for the staves to come about naturally. They cultivated the Practitioners for the only purpose of creating more staves and then having them die, freeing the staff.”

“For them to use,” Grant said darkly, which surprised Wassa. Paul realized no staff had been used when they were captured. The vole had one, but he had entered after, and the way Thomas talked about it, Wassa got things sorted out fast enough once she was awake she might not have noticed it.

“You said you aren’t the only one who survived,” the cheetah said. “What happened to the others?”

“I do not know. The few who, like me, sought to keep the Chamber from attempting this again went their own way after our last failure at keeping them from harvesting Practitioners. They may have tried again. I no longer had the energy, so I sought a different method. I scried the future for what to do.”

“You can do precognition?” the cheetah asked, surprised.

“Knowledge is an idea, a concept, that does not limit itself to what has happened in the past. It led me to retrieve the tool required to ensure the Chamber be stopped, and then were to slumber, so the one to stop them would find me so I could hand him the tool so he could ready it for the coming battle.



She cleared the coffee table by shoving the items on it to the ground, then covered it with the sleeve of her robe. When she raised the arm, there was something on the table.

“Holy fuckk!” Grant was standing and backing away.

Paul looked at the broken sword. The pieces were arranged as they should be, but there were close to a dozen of them. The hilt was intact while the blade was shattered.

The cheetah stood and took a slow step back. “What is that?”

“Tell me that isn’t what I think it is,” Grant demanded of Wassa. Her reaction was one of confusion.

“What is it?” Donal asked.

“That,” Grant pointed, “is fucking Excalibur.”

# Storyboard, 1.5-19

Paul watched, stunned first by the proclamation, and then by Wassa's claim Grant was to forge the staff back to its original form.

Then chaos erupted as Grant started arguing with the seal that he couldn't do that; he worked best with wood, not metal. If you wanted to see what he did when he worked with metal, try and find a car or truck he's ever owned that isn't a blasted pile of scrap right now.

Denton stayed out of the argument, as Wassa proclaimed that she saw the kangaroo repair it, and therefore his belief in how little skilled he was was irrelevant. Then the cheetah clocked out entirely as he walked away with his phone to his ear.

When Donal stood, saying he'd go deal with the staves that were lost in the mail, Paul stood too. Where the squirrel headed out, Paul headed up. He hadn't known where Thomas had teleported to until he'd caught a glimpse of him peeking around a corner and then vanished again.

He knocked on the bedroom door gently. "Thomas, it's Paul."

The door cracked open and the rat looked left and right before pulling the golden tiger in and slamming the door.

"This is bad," Thomas muttered, pacing the length of the room. "We need to leave, now."

"Thomas, how about you sit down and take a breath?" Paul sat on the bed and patted the space next to him. "Things aren't that bad, are they?"

"Do you have any idea who that is?" Thomas demanded, and kept going. "That's Denton Brislow."

Paul nodded. "I know he's the reason you don't come to Denver often, but--"

"Do you know what is going to happen if Rpheal finds out we're in the same house? Fuck, that we were in the same room?"

“That’s...” Paul had to search his memory. The name hadn’t come up often in the last few years, with Thomas getting busy helping Grant retrieve staves. “The Lewiston guy who imprisoned you, and tried to kidnap you a few times after that.”

“Yes!”

Paul grabbed the rat’s arm and he passed and pulled him on his lap. “It isn’t like he’s going to be able to get you here, with everyone here. The sense I get is that Mister Brislow’s pretty important, and connected.”

“And he’s Rapheal’s arch nemesis!” Instead of pulling away, Thomas leaned against Paul’s chest after the exclamation.

“Then that’s even more reason to stay, isn’t it? Mister Brislow will keep Rapheal from doing anything.”

“Except probably nuke Denver.” Thomas ran a finger over Paul’s chest.

“Why would Rapheal do that?”

“Because he’s insane?” Thomas offered. “You have no idea how much he ranted about Brislow when he was... when I was his prisoner. If he wasn’t talking about how he was going to use me, he was screaming about how Brislow was the reason for everything that went wrong in his life. From nearly all his family being murdered by some tiger, to getting the Cormorans to kick him out of Denver and even being shunned by the Society for a few years. As far as Rapheal thinks, Brislow is the Anti-Christ.”

“Okay,” Paul said, amused at how Thomas had undown the buttons of his shirt as he spoke and was now running a hand through his fur. “That’s got to be the most extreme case of hate I’ve ever heard of, but I don’t see how-”

“He thinks I’m the holy grail,” Thomas said. “What do you think he’d do if he thought the Anti-Christ got his hands on the Holy Grail?”

Paul swallowed. At the idea, he told himself, and not how Thomas was lightly raking through his fur. “Can I ask you a question?” At least his best friend wasn’t freaking out anymore, but now probably wasn’t the time for this. “Is the Holy Grail real?”

“Why?” Thomas looked at him. “You want to drink from him?”

“It’s a per-” Paul realized what Thoams meant and rolled his eyes. Right, Society.

There was no such thing as a bad time for sex with them. And it wasn't like either of them had anything else to do at the moment. He smiled at the rat and reached back to the tail strap.

The knock at the door stopped him.

"Mister Hertz, I'd appreciate it if you didn't teleport away. Despite your justified fears, Raphael has no way of knowing you are here."

Paul looked at Thomas to gauge what he wanted, but his friend leaned forward to kiss him.

"Also," the cheetah added. "Mister Heeran. I'm only going to say this nicely once. Stop influencing him."

"What?" Paul looked at the door, then Thomas who barely seemed to register what was going on. What was he talking about? Paul wasn't doing anything.

The door opened and the cheetah stepped in, slamming the door in the bear's face as he tried to follow. He crossed his arms over his chest and studied Paul as Thomas moved to nuzzle him.

"Thomas, stop. Now is really not the time." He pushed the rat away and that seemed to cause him to regain enough of his senses to notice the cheetah and leap behind Paul.

"At least you didn't teleport away this time," the cheetah sighed. "Now, Mister Heeran, you are-"

"I'm not doing anything."

"I know you believe you aren't, but I also know what I'm feeling. And you're influencing him. So, again, I need you to stop it."

"How can you know I'm doing anything? Isn't one of the things about the factions that you only affect those within your faction?"

The cheetah searched Paul's face before responding. "You're confusing followers with gods, but even if it was like that, I'd still be able to sense your ability since it's from Him."

Paul shook his head. "We've established I'm not Society; the last time I was in an

orgy with enough Society men to initiate me was a few years ago. Also, it's been nearly two weeks since I've had sex so how I wouldn't be able to do any of His magic. Fuck, if not for how the staff shocked me, we wouldn't even know I was from one of the factions. And before you say it, there aren't any tigers among the Survivors, so it can't be them."

"There are the Missionaries," the cheetah said.

"The who?"

"You'd know if it had been one of them. They're big about explaining exactly what your duties are as one of them before you accept."

"Okay, so that's it then. I'm not one of you."

"Except that you are. Here, let me show you what it's like for your friend right now."

Paul swallowed, unsure what to expect, and when the cheetah frowned, he felt vindicated. He wasn't the one doing anything.

"Aren't you feeling-" the cheetah started, and was stopped by the bear bursting through the door and shoving him against the wall, kissing him hard.

Paul stared as the bear undid the cheetah's pants.

"That looks like it's going to be fun," Thomas whispered. "Be a shame not to join them." Paul bolted up as the rat groped him.

Thomas shook himself and frowned.

The bear flew across the room and stopped in mid air.

"That's enough of that," the cheetah said, panting and pulling his pants back up. "Definitely the same brand as your father, but not the same flavor."

"What is happening?" Thomas asked, and looked like he was fighting to remain on the bed.

"You know my father?" Paul asked. His mother never spoke of him. Paul didn't even know if he was alive or dead. He knew he'd asked, when he was younger, but she'd dismissed him with 'he wasn't that important in the grand scheme of thing'.

“No, but I know his family.” The cheetah fixed his gaze on Paul. “You, Mister Heeran, are an Orr.”

## Storyboard, 1.5-20

Paul sat among the boxes in the guest bedroom processing the few things Denton told him before heading out. He was an Orr. Only that made no sense, since he hadn't had a ceremony. But the cheetah had been on the receiving end of their power and he'd tapped it a few times, so he knew what it felt like. Paul definitely had the Orr influence, even if it was an odd variation of it. He couldn't seem to turn it off, and instead of affecting anyone he focused on, it affected anyone he was interested in or was attracted to.

That last part Denton hadn't been certain of, since his own range of attraction was wide, and he was definitely interested in the bear since he was a guy. The question was why the bear had nearly raped the cheetah while Thomas only started being much more amorous with Paul. Denton blamed how much energy he'd fed into it when Paul hadn't reacted, plus Thomas's natural resistance as a follower.

Paul had asked how to shut it down, and Denton didn't know. Abilities were an innate part of who they were, so that was going to have to come from Paul. Denton couldn't help him on it since all he had to do to stop using Paul's power was to stop tapping it.

The tiger had retreated to the bedroom once Denton left to remove himself from Thomas, since seeing him seemed to make it tough for his best friend to resist giving into temptation.

He'd considered calling his mother and demanding to know about his father, but there were so many reasons no to. One, he'd be misdirecting all his frustrations at his mothers, so not cool. Two, he'd need to take his phone back from Wassa and he didn't know how easily they'd be able to whip up a replacement talisman. And three, he'd have to explain to his mother how he'd come to need to know who his father was, how his mother had sex with one of the Orrs, let alone been able to dismiss him as "someone unimportant".

She already worried enough about him as it was, with him being half a dozen states away. Telling her he'd been involved in fixing a series of magical problems wouldn't reassure her.

He let out a breath and stood. Enough sulking. Whatever excuses he'd given himself, that was what he was doing here, sulking. And sulking didn't help anything. He opened the door and checked to make sure Thomas wasn't around.

“Non,” Thomas’s voice came from the kitchen. “Tu dois t’assurer que Jacques n’est pas impliquer.”

Paul peered into the kitchen. Thomas was leaning against the counter, phone to his ear. Frennd and the name Jacques meant he was talking to one of the Mercier. Paul’s Frennd amounted to oui, non, and merci. Which he’d picked up for a trip to Paris Thomas took him on.

While he didn’t understand the rest, it probably had to do with Jacques constantly trying to be involved in anything against the Chamber. Ever since they killed Hubert, the badger was on the warpath and Thomas considered it his mission to keep his indestructible friend from find out if there was a limit to his power.

Paul paused as he entered the living room on seeing the muscular raccoon leaning against the wall next to the door.

“I’m just here to make sure no one bothers y’all. The boss called in people to secure the house.”

“Doesn’t Donal have wards on?” Paul asked.

“Don’t know anything about that. Not magical myself. But I figure if there were any good, the boss wouldn’t bother with extra people.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if Donal was here,” Grant commented without looking up from his phone.

The raccoon grinned. “No, sir, I wouldn’t. But he’s not back yet. The boss also said that should I feel the need to have stripes bone me, I was to get out of dodge, or else.”

“Let me guess,” Paul said dryly, “He threatened to remove your balls.”

“Oh no, those are the kinds of threats he leaves to Mister Marrow. That and threats to fuck us still we don’t remember our names anymore. No. The boss just likes to remind us that he’s the one authorizing the transfer of my pay to my bank.”

“And that’s enough?”

The raccoon raised an eyebrow. “You try feeding three husbands without the premium paycheck Link pays.”



“Two wasn’t enough?” Paul asked, chuckling.

“There’s way too much love in this heart of mine to stop at two. Anyway, if you want to head outside, I’d ask you to wait until the others get here. The boss didn’t want to worry you, but a bunch of people went running when we arrived. Now he figures they’re some of the Chamber the lady talked about.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Grant said, then muttered, “Ever, the way these videos don’t explain anything about metal smithing.” He glanced at the seal, who was pulling items from a box. She turned a toy car over in her hand, studying it as if what it was, or possibly what concept it embodies, would reveal itself.

“Can I help you with anything?” Paul asked, sitting in the chair next to hers. He figured that as a woman, she was the safest person for him to be this close to right now.

She smiled at him. “I do not know.” She picked up a small flashlight out of the box and looked at the bulb end. Paul lowered her hand; it was probably broken, but why take the chance. “I knew the world would change while I slumbered, but I didn’t understand how much. And Grant tells me all of this only happened in the last hundred years.”

“Probably closer to a hundred and fifty,” Paul said.

She nodded. “My family had lived the same way, fishing the sea for enough to live and bartering with the family of farmers for wheat, for so many generations that we could not convince of it ever changing. Even once I found I could channel the world’s creativity, what I did with it was nothing like this.” She pulled a broken drill from the box and seemed amazed by its weight. “What is this?”

“It’s a tool used in building... well, it depends how it’s used.”

“A crafter’s tool.” She nodded and closed her eyes. “I would be the idea of assembling something. Improving it.”

“It can be used to take something apart too.”

Her eyes snapped open in surprise. “It contains contradicting ideas?”

Grant chuckled.

“I guess we don’t think of them as contradictions. Just different facets of how

construction works. I'm more of an applied theorist at this point than someone who builds anything, and I have no idea if I could even explain biochemistry in a way you'd understand."

"Alchemy."

Paul stared at her. "I guess you could summarize the chemistry part of the equation. I mean, we've moved beyond cauldrons, but it is essentially understanding the true nature of things and how to turn them into something else."

"Can you turn lead into gold?" she asked with a hint of mockery.

"No, but only because I approach chemistry from the viewpoint of biology; basically the building blocks of life." He elaborated. "There are those who can and have turned lead into gold, but it was more to just to prove they could. It takes way too much energy and doesn't result in stable gold; it will eventually turn back into lead."

She smiled. "Then there are things that have not been made better by the passage of time."

"Well, I wouldn't- wait. Are you saying you can turn lead into gold?"

"What's gold?" Grant asked, still not looking up from his phone.

"A precious metal," Paul answered.

"Go deeper. Not the item, the concept."

Paul considered it. "Wealth, value, malleability."

"That's a good start. Concepts can be altered and moved. The most powerful magics use their essence, but it's possible to move them to something else. If you take something that's almost like gold, same weight and malleability, it's easy to link other concepts so you can bridge the gap. Add enough of the concept of value to lead and you get-"

"Fools gold," Paul said. "You're talking about fools gold."

Grant chuckled and looked up. "Not only fools fall for it. That one never lasts, but you get the idea."

"Could you make 'fake gold' that-"

The phone around Wassa's neck rang. He didn't recognize the number, but the caller ID said it was from Denver.

"You're going to want to take that," the raccoon said, looking at his phone.

Wassa handed him the phone.

"Hello?"

"Paul, it's Denton."

"Hi." He wasn't sure he liked how jovial the cheetah sounded. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh this isn't about me. You happened to come up in a conversation with someone I know, and he is extremely interested in meeting you."

"And who is that person?" Paul wondered if Thomas was willing to take him to... would South African be far enough for what he suspected was coming?

"Arnold."

"Arnold who?"

Paul could hear the smile in the cheetah's voice. "Why, Arnold Orr, of course."

If the stories he'd heard were even close to the truth, Paul decided he'd need to be on the moon to keep this meeting from happening.

# Storyboard, 1.5-21

“Are you there yes?” Thomas said on his phone as he paced the living room. “Roland, this is the Orrs, I really don’t want to have to explain to them why a teleporter arrived late. I doubt they’re going to care that I’m down to one landing spot in San Francisco after what the Chamber did.” He paused. “No, they are going to care and pick one for me, and probably fuck me until I know the room by heart. I’ve only dealt with two of them at this point, and that’s enough. So I need you- you’re there? Good, we’ll be there in a sex.”

Paul tilted an ear. “You dealt with the Orrs? I don’t remember you mentioning them before.”

“Don’t deal with Aaron, and whatever you do, do not let Aiden fuck you. You don’t need to start singing on top of dancing.” Thomas grabbed his arm, then was falling into them as instead of being in Donal’s house, they were in a locker room.

“I got him,” another rat, naked, said, picking Thomas up.

“Hey Paul,” the raccoon, in the process of undressing, said, “Your ride’s not here yet.”

“Ride?” Paul asked, looking around. “I thought-” he stopped as Niel pushed him against the lockers. “I thought you were going to help Roland with Thomas.” He grinned as the raccoon started unbuttoning his shirt. The grin fell as he remembered he liked Roland’s boyfriend and knew him well enough they’d already fucked, which meant...

“Niel, you should stop. This isn’t you.”

The raccoon tilted an ear. “You suddenly think you’re ugly or something? When don’t we want to have you fuck us?” Niel groped Paul and the golden tiger swallowed the moan. Did it matter if his was influencing his friends? It wasn’t like they ever said no to sex with him before.

He kissed the raccoon hard, running a hand down until he had it around the hard cock. A hand reached behind and undid his tail strap, then Niel also had a hand around his cock and Paul moaned. Fuck, he needed this and-

“Can you lot hurry this up? We’re on the clock.”

Paul broke the kiss and looked over Niel’s shoulder. The tiger in the doorway was lean, but his leather jacket and pants were tight enough on him to show muscles. He looked at them impatiently. The he noticed Paul and smirked.

“You have a meeting. Either pack it in or finish this pronto.”

Paul swallowed and pushed Niel away. “I can drive myself,” he said, reaching behind before his pants dropped any further. The tiger got enough of an eyefull to smile and lick his lips.

“You’re not getting behind the wheel of anything after you drove your car off the Golden Gate bridge. Who the fuck taught you to drive?”

“My mother,” Paul replied, “and she did a great job. If not for the Chamber trying to kill me and Shila, I wouldn’t have done that.”

The tiger snorted. “There’s still way better things you can have done. Since you’re all wrapped up again, I’m guessing you prefer the meeting over the sex. Good choice. Arnie’s not a patient guy.”

“Who are you again?”

The tiger smirked. “I’m Adam Orr.”

#####

Paul looked at the passing buildings, trying to prepare himself for the meeting. He couldn’t think of one good thing that had been said about the Orrs beyond that they looked after their city. Madoc only had good things to say about Dietrick, but the rat was kind of besotted by the mountain of a tiger, and Dietrich was always addressed as his own entity rather than part of the Orrs who ran the city.

“I’m not feeling anything,” Adam said, glancing at him before looking ahead again. There had been something hyper about the tiger in the locker room, but that had vanished as soon as he sat behind the wheel, as if he couldn’t wait to be driving again.

“Should you?” Paul asked.

“Isn’t that your thing? You know, any guy around you just wants you to fuck them?”

Not going to happen, by the way. I do the fucking. But that's what Brislow said to Arnie. Don't call him that, by the way; he hates it."

"It only affects guys I know," Paul replied. "As far as we could work out. I don't know you, so..."

"You want to?" Adam asked with a lewd grin. "Get to know me so intimately you won't be able to think straight by the time I'm done with you?"

"No."

"So what's the point of only influencing guys you know. You've already gotten what you need out of them, I figure."

"Haven't you ever had sex with someone you actually know?" Paul asked. He knew the answer, since Adam wouldn't be saying that otherwise.

"Fucked my brothers. And I know them way too well. So, yeah, I don't see the point."

"At least I don't need to coerce anyone into having sex with me."

Adam snorted. "With that power of yours, it isn't like you have a choice. Fuck, how long does it take you to get to know a guy enough you'll start affecting him?"

Paul shrugged. "It's not like I need to fuck all the time. Unlike the lot of you, I can go more than a day without putting my dick in an ass." He chuckled. "Fuck, it's been two weeks since the last time and I was able to pull my-" He slammed into the seatbelt as the car skidded to a stop.

"What?" Adam demanded, staring at him.

Cars honked as they drove around them. Paul saw a few middle fingers from the drivers that passed them.

"I told you, I don't need to fuck all the time."

The tiger stared at him for a few more seconds. "Call my asshole of a brother."

"What?" a man said over the sound system before Paul could ask what that meant.

"Arnie, change of plans. I'm taking golden boy here to my club."

“No.” There was a lot of annoyance in the way that one word was growled.

“Arnold, the kick hasn’t fucked in two weeks.”

The silence stretched, and Adam smiled in triumph.

“No.”

“Arnie.”

“Don’t call me that. And it’s still no. He’s gone two weeks already. He can survive the time it takes to work this out, and then he can go to my club and get laid properly.”

Adam looked at Paul and grinned. “You are so lucky I don’t have to listen to one thing he says.” He started driving again, forcing drivers to swerve away and honk angrily.

“Adam, if you aren’t at the office in fifteen minutes with him, I am putting you on watch duty over Wolf and his nannies for a month.”

“You wouldn’t,” Adam replied, sounding less than certain.

“Try me.”

The tiger swallowed, then slammed the accelerator down.

#####

Paul stood as the men around the table looked at him. They didn’t look as old as Paul expected. From the stories he heard, he’d expected them to be in their fifties or something, not at most in their late twenties. The only one who looked like he might be pushing thirty-five was the one with his feet on the table and eyes glued to his phone, playing a game by the way his fingers moved.

Two of them wore suits, and only one of them looked like he belonged in one. That one seemed almost leaner than Adam. Speaking of, the driver shoved the feet of the older one off the table before sitting.

“What the fuck?”

“Put the phone away, Ani.”

“Fuck you.” He put his feet back on the table.

“Not today,” Adam replied.

Paul pulled his attention away from the two because the one in the clearly expensive suit was looking at him with a calculating expression he didn't like.

“He doesn't look like much,” the only one standing said. He was leaning against the edge of the table. He was only rivaled by the one in the cheaper suit in build, the one seated at the head of the table and who looked like he wanted to rip the suit off. “We sure he's our?” The speaker wore unlaced construction boots, ripped jeans, and an unbuttoned shirt under a biker's jacket.

“I like his coloring,” one said, “But he isn't mine. I swear that other than that one time Arnold talked us into-” he shuddered “-I haven't touched a woman since other than to pose her.”

“He's an Orr,” the one at the head of the table said. “Brislow confirmed it.”

“Oh, and of course you believe him,” the one in the expensive suit said. “It's been over a decade, Arnold. Have you decided to move on and love ano-”

“Finish that, Aiden, and I am going to rip your tongue out.”

“No, still touchy about Art,” Ani said. “I think it's a fatal condition.”

“Oh, Anakin,” the one who'd talked about posing a woman replied, putting a hand to his heart. “Such a vicious blow. I never thought you capable of it.”

“Look,” another on the leaner said said, standing, and Paul's eyes immediately went to the holstered gun at his hip. Then he noticed the one under his arm. “We know he isn't one of ours, so he's got to be one of the Folk's projects we missed when we cleaned house.”

“Can't be,” the one who had to be Arnold said. “The whole reason they took Brislow's kid was to ‘replace’ us. If they had him, they wouldn't have needed to.”

Aiden snorted. “After how he pissed them off?”

“I'm not saying they wouldn't have done it, but it wouldn't have been to replace us; just to make Brislow suffer. They'd probably have just killed the kid.”



“If it’s not us and not them, that only leaves the uncles,” gun-toter said. “I’m guessing you’ve asked them already, since you are so much smarter.”

“You want the chair, Alex?” Arnold asked. “Do any of you want to finally take the fucking chair so I can go back to having a life?”

The snorts around the table made it clear that none of them wanted it.

“Then how about you fucking stop questioning and undermining my authority?”

“Maybe if you got the fucking moving,” Anakin said, still not looking up from his phone. “We wouldn’t be bored and feel the need to entertain ourselves at your expense. Some of us have guys to go fuck, you know.” He looked up long enough to glance at Paul, then back at his phone. “If none of you take him, I will.”

“He’s family,” Arnold snapped. “So we’re all having a got at him.”

“Okay, I’m going to stop you right there,” Paul said, then found himself at the receiving end of six testosterone-filled glares.

“Oh, you’re fucked now,” Anakin said, eyes on his phone.

Instead of outright telling them he had no interest in sex with any of them, he pointed out the one thing they seemed to be missing. “Who says it has to be one of you?”

“You’re an Orr,” Arnold said. “There aren’t thre ways that happens.”

“Not that I’m not an Orr. Why are you acting like I’m one of youtube way of someone still alive? Maybe one of your ancestors lost track of a kid like with Thomas’s family and it was just a-” yeah, not happy “-coincidence I got initiated.”

“That’s not how it works for us,” Arnold said. “The only way to be initiated is for your father to have fucked you, so he’s alive.”

Paul snicked. “Oh well, now I know you’re wrong.”

“Do tell.”

“The only Orr whose ever fucked me is Dietrich, and nothing special happened..”

after...”

Paul had been with Shila from basically the day after that coupling, and there had been no guys Paul knew until they were in Denver and found Donal. Who he knew only a little and wasn't bad looking. And who had kissed him before even saying hello.

“Oh, fuck.”

Dietrich Orr was his father.

# Storyboard, 1.5-22

“We’re here,” the weasel behind the wheel said, snapping Paul out of his thoughts.

The Ride-Share had been against the others... his family? His cousins? How did he call the people who ran a city while not being officially in power? Well, if he didn’t want to be kind, the mob.

He was trying to be kind.

He was trying hard.

The way they screamed at one another made it hard.

He paid the driver and exited. The building looked more like a warehouse than a bodybuilding gym. The name over the door was understated. Massive, was what this gym was called. It wasn’t Dietrich’s public gym, where he went to be adored. Where the bodybuilding aspects were more accidental to all the sex that took place.

Paul knew sex happened here- Madoc had regaled him with enough stories- but this was where Dietrich trained the men who were serious about competing in bodybuilding competitions.

It also meant that, unlike the other place that Madoc referred to as Dietrich’s club, the atmosphere was more serious, more tense, and the attitude far less friendly the few times the rat had convinced Paul to come for a visit. One of the occasional attempts to get Paul to join a gym and work on his physique.

Madoc liked his men more defined than Paul and kept trying to move the golden tiger in that direction. Since Paul had made it clear that if the rat used his power on him, they were never having sex again, the old fashion way was all that was left for him to make it happen.

Paul liked the condition he currently maintained himself at; he was able to maintain that easily due to good genes and his goal was to allow anyone to be whatever they wanted no matter what their genes said. Him knowing where his good genes came from doesn’t change that.

He stopped procrastinating and finally stepped into the plain looking lobby. A counter on the left acted as a display for a variety of bodybuilding supplements. On the right was a waiting area with posters of men in various poses showing off their muscles. Madoc had told him they were all men who had trained here and won championships.

Opposite the entrance was a door leading to the workout area. Immediate on the right were lockers and showers. Then it was an open field of weight machines and naked men built to make other men envious, jealous, or simply terrified.

Dietrich had a strict no-women policy in any of his gyms.

The cheetah behind the counter was muscular beyond what should be possible for the species, stretching the shirt he wore to near transparency. He didn't bother hiding the sneer as he looked Paul over. Superiority wasn't a complex among the men Dietrich trained, it was an entire high-rise.

"I need to speak with Dietrich, please," Paul said, stepping up to the counter.

"Mister Orr doesn't do walk-ins." The cheetah looked Paul up and down again. "I doubt he'd do you, even if you had an appointment."

"I'm here to talk with him, could you just let him know? I'm sure he'll be okay with it."

"I'm sure Mister Orr would be okay with someone like you just stepping into his world." The cheetah's smile had nothing friendly in it. "Unfortunately for you, he's in the middle of a very intense training session at the moment. But if you want, I can pencil you in for... well, eventually."

Paul put his hands on the counter and fought with his annoyance. "Please tell Mister Orr that his son is here to see him."

"The shock on the cheetah's face was satisfying, but it didn't last. "Nice try. No kid of his would be as skinny as you."

"I'm not-"

The inner door slammed open and a naked rat stepped through, looking and sniffing around, and quickly locking eyes on Paul. Madoc was hard, and licking his lips as he approached.

Paul cursed mentally. In his hurry to come see Dietrich, he'd forgotten to check if Madoc was working at this gym today.

"Mad," the cheetah said severely. "You know how Mister Orr feels about being naked in the lobby."

"Don't worry about it, Todd. I won't be the only one for long."

Paul didn't wait and stepped up to Madoc. "I'm going to escort him back inside." He grabbed the rat's arm.

"You can't-"

The cheetah's voice cut off with the door closing.

Paul turned them immediately into the locker room as Madoc groped him.

"Mad, you need to stop."

"Come on, Paul, it's okay in the locker room." The rat rubbed up and down Paul's hardening cock and the golden tiger quickened his step past the men changing. A few of them looked at them, and the expressions went from bored, to annoyed, to lustful, to curious. They entered the showers, with Madoc having pushed a hand into Paul's pants and rubbing the head.

Paul nearly fell from the sensation. Jerking off these last weeks hadn't been enough to do more than push the need down, but now he had to deny himself. This was clearly not his friend in control of himself.

He reached for the controls on the wall and turned the shower up to full blast.

Madoc screamed at the cold water, and Paul gritted his teeth. Even expecting it, it was a shock.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" the rat demanded, turning the shower off.

Paul wondered if he could be affected by his own power because the sight of the dripping wet rat only made him want to fuck him. No, he was just fucking horny. This was something he'd have to learn to live with, considering who his god was.

“I need you able to think, Mad.”

“I was-”

“With more than your ass.”

The rat closed his mouth.

Somewhere among the sounds of the showers, Paul heard chuckling and was reminded this was a communal shower. As Madoc had implied, Dietrich didn't mind if the men fucked in the locker room and showers.

He lowered his voice. “Dietrich's my father, and because I had sex with him a couple of weeks ago, I've been initiated. Turns out my power makes guys I like want to have me fuck them, so what you're feeling right now, the fact you went in the lobby naked and erect knowing what Dietrich can do to the guys who break the gym's rules tells me I'm the reason you're this horny. I can't leave, so I need you to dry off, get dressed, and get as far from me as possible.”

The rat looked him in the eyes. “Are you done?”

Paul worried about how calm Madoc seemed to be, but nodded. He was then grabbed, turned, and shoved against the wall before he could react.

“If you ever do this to me again and you don't actually fuck me, I am going to tie you in my basement and fuck you until the ropes break because of how big you're going to have gotten. Am I clear?”

“Mad I-”

“Am I clear?” the rat growled.

“Yes, you are, but-”

“Good.” The rat let go of him. “Having said that, thank you for not taking advantage of the situation.”

Paul watched as Madoc slicked the water out of his fur. “Mad, you really should get away from me. At least in another room. Thomas seemed to have an easier time resisting if he didn't see me.”

“Has Thomas felt what that unrestrained influence is like, Paul?”

“I don’t do that,” Paul replied, offended by the implications.

“My boss does,” the rat replied with a chuckle. “You were right. That was me being influenced earlier. But that’s because I didn’t know what you were doing.” He looked the golden tiger in his wet clothes up and down. “Now, if I were to rip those off you, throw you to the floor, and sit on your hard cock until you came so hard He showed up to know what made that happen, it would be all me.”

“You just think that.” Paul wished he could back up more, or run off, but he was worried it would cause madoc to chase him.

“Paul, I’ve felt Dietrich’s influence. I can resist yours.”

Paul watched Madoc, then chuckled. “Sometimes I forget you aren’t the guy running between ragged, scared, and desperate you were after you had your memories back.”

“That’s because the only time we hang out since you moved to the Bay, it’s social or while I’m at work. I got some of that fucked out of my by my boss’s nephews and the rest was realizing I didn’t have to worry about Rapheal sending a hit squad to bring me back so I could pump out babies for him.

“You had sex with the other...” Paul couldn’t finish it.

“Dietrich insisted on it after he got me to admit some of the stuff Rapheal did to the guys. He wanted me to be able to take care of myself if it came down to it. I don’t have the military training some of the guys at the frat got pumped into their heads by Hendrick. Instead I have Aaron’s fighting ease, Arnold strength and endurance, and Alex’s knack for guns. Raphy is going to have to send some really trained people if he wants me back.”

“And that is if I am not here,” a deep voice said, and Dietrich stepped into the shower. “If I am, it doesn’t matter who he sends. All he will get are the pieces of them that are left.”

Paul looked at the massive tiger. He wasn’t hard, which was a blessing. But this is two men Paul liked enough to have had sex with previously. If one of them lost the battle of will, would that drag the other into a frenzy of Paul having to fuck them both?

“Madoc, Jaeger is wondering where you are. Your sets should have started already.”

“Yes sir. What about Paul? I know-”

“My son and I will be talking in my office.”

#####

The office had shelves on the walls, but instead of books those shelves were filled with trophies. Paul looked at them from the door to avoid looking at the naked tiger’s muscular back. Unlike with Madoc, he didn’t want to have sex with Dietrich at this moment, but he figured avoiding temptation was a good plan. He didn’t think all the trophies were Dietrich’s wins, but that left the question of whose were they.

“Have a seat,” Dietrich said as he put on sweatpants.

Paul hesitated. He was here to get answers, and to get away from the screams in the office room. But he wasn’t sure what to make of this version of Dietrich. He had to be angry at the revelation. Then there were the pants. He hadn’t expected the tiger to get dressed, even minimally.

Dietrich smiled. “We’re not here to fuck. If I was going to give in to what you’re sending out, I’d have done it in the shower.”

“So you feel it too?”

The tiger shrugged. “Not really. You grow up with my brothers and fathers, and you gain some form of resistance to being influenced that way. So you don’t have to worry, we’re just going to talk.” He sat in the chair behind the desk. “Do you have a picture of your mother around the time you were born? You’d think I’d remember a golden tigress but...” he shrugged.

Paul took out his phone as he sat. And it was his; Grant had gotten Wassa her own phone to act as a translation talisman.

He quickly looked through the drive’s memory for any family pictures, but he and his mother had never been big on carrying them around wherever they went. There would be some at home, and there might be a few linked folders on the net, but it was going to take awhile before he found them.

“The fact I don’t remember her, considering how distinctive she looks, makes me think it was during one of the few occasions someone managed to slip me a drug. I’m very careful about what I put in my body,” he continued. “Having a god’s cum flow through me doesn’t mean I take it for granted, and a serious resistance to drugs didn’t come until Arnold. When you have my kind of body, there are people, men and women, who will go to



extremes to have a chance to experience it. It's possible your mother was one of them, and if she-

"No," Paul stated. "Don't even go there."

"Paul, the fact you share blood doesn't excuse her-

Paul was up, hands on the desk, glaring at the mountain of a tiger before him. "She had nothing to do with drugging you," he snarled. "You want to know how she referred to you the few times I asked when I was younger? As someone inconsequential. Do you think she'd refer to you like that if she had to go to the extent of drugging you to have sex?"

Dietrich calmly watched Paul, and that was enough to make him realize he was almost screaming. He decided not to apologize. The man had insulted his mother, and like he said, the fact they shared blood didn't excuse him.

"I do think she might refer to me like that, Paul. Here's a question for you. Did you ask your mother why meeting me made her so nervous?"

"Have you looked at yourself?"

Dietrich smiled. "No more than most men. I'm not that vain." He raised a hand. "But I know what you mean. If it was the first time she'd met me, I'd understand the reaction, but..."

Paul continued because he couldn't stop himself. "She already knew what you looked like."

# Storyboard, 1.5-23

“Paul, how are you?” his mother said with relief before he could greet her.

Paul leaned against the building’s metal wall, looking up at the gray clouds filling the sky. He hadn’t wanted to make this call inside Dietrich’s office, or even in his gym. “I’m fine mom, I-”

“Why didn’t you call me sooner? Why was your phone not taking calls? Do you have any idea how worried I was after I received that cryptic message from someone I never even heard of? All your friends would tell me was that you were fine.”

“I’m sorry, mom. Things... escalated.” It had to be something Shila did, not that he felt his mother would take the news someone had cut her off from him well. “I don’t know why you couldn’t call me, but that was for the best. I’m back in San Francisco now and-”

“Good, they wouldn’t tell me where you were, either. Does that mean you’re back to looking for a lab to work at? You know that if things get too difficult, or you’re running lower on money, you can move back to Minneapolis. Your room is always available to you here and you also have friends here-”

“Mom.” He hated cutting her off, but she would go on about the good points of him moving back home now that he had his doctorate. “Look, I’m sorry if this is coming out of left-field, but did you know Dietrich Orr was my father?”

She was silent for long enough, he worried. “Not until your graduation. I never knew his name. It... never came up.” His sigh of relief was loud enough, she asked. “Paul, is everything okay?”

“It is now. The worse that might happen is that I’ll have to take a job working for him, but that’s not too-”

“Paul Heeran, I raised you better than to let some man bully you into accepting anything. I don’t care if that man’s supposed to be your father. He’s still some stranger who had nothing to do with you until now.”

“Mom, I’ve known him for a couple of years now. He didn’t know we were related,

either. He was just Madoc's boss and a guy I got to know." He didn't add anything, not even his usual comment about having danced with him as his mother knew what else that implied. "He even made the job offer before we found out, and it was just an offer. Me having to accept it has more to do with his nephews. They kinda run San Francisco, so-"

"What do you mean they run San Francisco? I've never heard the name Orr in anything I read about it."

Paul chuckled. His mother learning as much as she could about the city he lived in, was her way of finding things she pointed out to show they weren't as good as in Minneapolis. "They don't hold official positions, they just make sure things go the way they want and that benefits the city." He finished the statement, and there was a pause. "Mom?"

"Get out of there, Paul."

"Mom, it's okay, they-"

"No, Paul, listen to me. Do you know what you just described? You don't want to have anything to do with men like that, Paul. Trust me."

"Mom, I know it doesn't sound idea, but-"

"Paul, they're criminals." She lowered her voice. "They're mobsters."

The way she said how he'd been trying not to think about his... family bothered him.

"They aren't that bad," he said, and immediately felt like he was lying. Dietrich wasn't that bad, and Madoc said he used a stronger version of Paul's power on him. He had the sense the rest wouldn't be any better. "And I need their help. The power I got from them isn't like the others and I need to show me how to contr-" his mother's phone hitting a hard surface stopped him. "Mom?" as he was about to call for her again, he heard something that sounded a lot like a body dropping to the floor. He'd heard plenty of those in the last few days.

Dread mounted as he waited for someone from the Chamber to take her phone and let him know what he had to do to see her again. When that didn't happen after a few seconds, and he couldn't make out someone else walking around, a new dread formed.

He shouted for her. She wasn't exactly young, and he'd shocked her with the news he was magical.

He hesitated to end the call, but he was the only one there. No one could call for help in his stead.

He called 911 and hurried to explain he'd been on a call with his mom in Minneapolis and he'd heard her fall and hadn't acknowledged his shouts. He was afraid she'd had a heart attack.

The dispatcher was surprisingly calm to his ear, and he listened as she relayed the information to the Minneapolis emergency services. She told him what was happening, and while a part of Paul wanted to scream at her he wasn't a child and he knew the ambulance would be there as quickly as they could, more of him was relieved she hadn't simply told him it would be okay and disconnected.

He heard the paramedics speak to each other as they exited the ambulance and the medical speech was surprisingly calming, even if he didn't understand most of it. It reminded him of one of the lunchrooms at the university, with all the medical students talking over their classes.

Then they sounded concerned. They called his mother's name. There was talk of her pulse and breathing, her being unresponsive. Their tone was professional, but hurried. Paul couldn't follow it.

Then came the words he dreaded.

"She's in good hands," the dispatcher told him. "The hospital will contact you once they have more news. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

You can stay on the line, he wanted to scream, let me have a lifeline to my mother. You can't abandon me like this.

"No, thank you for everything you did." And so she wouldn't be the one cutting him off, he terminated the call himself.

#####

Paul stared at his phone, still waiting for another update.

The hospital had called just as he closed the door to the hotel room to let him know his mother was fine. It hadn't been a heart attack, but they were keeping her overnight because she'd hit her head in the fall, and that they would call him with any other news.

So he sat alone in the hotel room, staring at his phone when what he wanted to do was go to any of his friends and have them distract him.

The problem was that, except for some female friends from his classes, he liked and was interested in everyone he could think of calling. And none of those knew about magic, which cut off basically all of the stuff he needed to vent about. He was not reading one of normal friends into the existence of magic, and he wasn't in the mood for sex.

Fuck, what he wanted was for his mother to hug him and tell him everything was going to be okay.

How old had he been the last time he'd felt like this?

The knock at the door had him halfway there in the irrational belief it was her, here to comfort him. The realization it had to be one of his friends hit too late for him to stop from opening the door.

The rat on the other side of the door looked him up and down. "You've looked better," Judith said, then stepped into the room and Paul moved out of the way reflexively rather than being bowled over by a Hertz woman.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, closing the door.

"Really? Who else was Roland or Thomas going to call to check in on you?"

"Madoc?"

"Probably. You were at the gym when you vanished."

"Do I want to know how you found out where I was?"

The smile she gave him had been known to cause men to walk into walls. Paul had seen it happen twice. "You are so sweet when you can't think."

"I can think-" then his ears folded back in embarrassment. "Trevor."

"And the uncounted ways he had to find out stuff through Royal Security." She looked him over again. "I'd have never guessed."

"Guessed what?"

“That you’re an Orr.”

Paul’s shoulders sagged. “Yeah. I-”

“Oh no you don’t.” She was in his space and he had to back away. “I did not come here to witness a pity party.”

“I know. You came here to check in on me so you can tell the others how I’m doing.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And what? You want me to tell them you’re a miserable mess?” She shook her head. “I do that and they’re going to be banging on this door, then you’re new power is going to make them want to bang you and-” she stopped. “You know, that might be fun to watch.” She shook herself before Paul had the chance to object. “No, no. I’m not here to get off on you guys having sex. I am here to cheer you up.”

He narrowed his eyes. “And how do you plan on doing that?” He’d known her long enough to be wary of any time she said no to anything sexually related. Thomas still didn’t believe there wasn’t some connection to the women’s version of the Society for how sexual the women in his family were.

She gave him another of her intellect-shattering smiles. “I’m taking you shopping.”

#####

How had he let this happen? He wondered as he juggled bags containing kid’s clothing, a box of toys, and more boy’s outfits over his shoulder. He’d grown up watching the Hertz’s women pull men along with their smiles and beauties, get them to help with errands no sane man wanted to take part in.

First Thomas’s mother, with not only her husband but any man she came across when she needed help. Then Judith once she was old enough to realize the power she had.

He knew better than to let them rope him into this.

He followed Judith into the baby furniture store.

Evidently not.

He stared as she studied a crib on display, and he quickly searched for the boxed version. There was no way she could expect him to carry that on top of everything else

already in his arms.

Wait.

Why would she want him to carry a crib?

Why was she even looking at a crib?

“Oh my God.”

She grinned at him.

He went through the items he'd mindlessly carried without actually looking at them. The color and sizes... they were all wrong. Ryan's color was red, not orange, and those were too small, even for a boy his age.

“Really?” he asked. And she squealed and jumped in place as she nodded. He stepped forward to hug her and was reminded of everything he carried. “Okay, we need someplace I can put these down.”

#####

Paul looked at the boxed crib on the floor next to the table and was amazed at the ease with which one smile had gotten a passerby to carry it to the food court where they now sat, untouched food before him. Judith was eating... well, for two.

“How did it take so long?” he asked. “I mean, yeah, Trevor has guys to work his horniness off with, but neither of you are exactly shy about letting us know how often you're going at it.”

“Magic,” she answered before slurping her peanut butter milkshake.

“Don't they usually use magic to make sure a kid is happening?” Paul had given him a five-second rundown of how men as gay as the Society went about ensuring they had kids in the same breath as he said he didn't know if he liked the method.

“Knowing how to make sure it happens helps make sure it doesn't.” She took a bit out of her burger.

“Why wait three years? I saw how you two were with Ryan. We all expected there to be a dozen of them by the time the year was over.”

“Just seven,” she replied before popping an onion ring in her mouth. Paul thought that was an oddly specific number, but she continued before he could ask about it. “Trevor didn’t want us to have kids one after the other like a machine. That’s too much like what that old elder of his is doing. So we agreed that we’re waiting a couple of years between each.”

“Okay, but since you said you wanted seven of them, you two are-”

Red for Ryanb, Orange for the next one. Seven in total.

“Please tell me you are not seriously going to saddle your kids with being a rainbow.”

She grinned.

He chuckled. “They are going to hate you so much when they become teens.”

“Then they can go to their father for comfort.”

“Still, you’re going to want to pick up the pace if you don’t want to be old before the last one comes about.”

Her smile let him know she was already working on that. She had said Trevor decided to take their time in between.

“Has Thoams talked to you about kids?” she asked after taking a bit of the blueberry turnover.

“Last time was a while ago. It’s why I know about how they use magic for that. He didn’t seem impressed.”

“Really?” she paused with the burger to her mouth, then took a bit.

“Why?”

“I overheard him and dad talk a few days ago. Thomas was asking him what it was like to raise him and Roland. Like when they were babies and toddlers. When I asked him about it, he sort of evaded answering by saying he wouldn’t do it until he found the right person.”

“Well, that sounds reasonable of him,” Paul said, and she raised an eyebrow. “You want me to pry and get him to spill whatever it is you feel he didn’t tell you, don’t you?”



“There’s the smart tiger I know and love. You’re going to make your family proud.”

“Proud, sure.” He looked at his plate of chow-mein and tried to force his appetite back. “Have you talked with Vic recently? Do you know where he stands on him or his sons officially joining the Society?”

“He shouldn’t bother,” someone said. “Bunch of assholes, the lot of them.” The tiger stepped to the table and looked them over. Behind him were two other men. A bison and a deer. The two men were dressed casually but carried themselves in a way that remind Paul of some of the Chamber’s people.

“First off,” Adam said, as Paul started asking what they were doing here. “What the fuck were you thinking going to that hole for a place to stay? You do know we own hotels actually worth setting foot in, right? Second,” he cut off Paul, about to point out he wasn’t rich, like all of them. “If you’re going to hide out somewhere, be fucking there when I go to pick you up.”

Paul waited.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Adam demanded.

“You could have called.”

The tiger snorted. “And watch you run for the state line? No thanks. You have no idea how lucky you are Dietrich called to tell us you were at his club because Arnie and Aaron were fighting over who was going to lead the team hunting you down.”

Judith snickered.

“Do you have a problem?” Adam demanded of her.

She shook her head. “I’m just amused at how dramatic you are. I didn’t realize it was a family trait.”

“And who the fuck are you?” Adam demanded.

“Are you implying I’m dramatic?” Paul asked.

She ignored him in favor of Adam. She smiled at him. “I’m Trevor’s wife.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?”

Her smile brightened. “He works at Royal Security.”

“What does where he work...” he narrowed his eyes. “Are you fucking comparing me to Aaron? I am nothing like him. He takes a side glance and turns it into an attack on his honor. That’s dramatic. I’m efficient and I don’t like wasting my time. There’s nothing dramatic about that.”

“If you say so.” She slurped her milkshake.

Paul stared at Judith. He knew the Hertz women were a force to be reckoned with, but he didn’t know they were ballsy enough to take on an Orr.

“You should go with him,” she told Paul. “He wouldn’t be in such a tizzy if it wasn’t important.”

“I’m not in a tizzy,” Adam snapped.

“Oh, so it isn’t important and Paul can stay?”

“No fucking way. Arnold’s going to rip my balls off if I’m not back with him.”

“See, tizzy.” She smiled. “You better go, Paul.”

“Are you sure? What about all these?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” She turned her smile on the two security men with Adam. “I’m sure one of those strong and virile men will be happy to help carry all of this, won’t you?”

“I’ll do it,” the bison said, raising his hand, then hurriedly lowering it as Adam glared at him.

“Just who do you work for?” the tiger demanded, and Judith chuckled. “You know what, fuck it. I have better things to do than question your manliness right now.” He looked at the deer. “What about you? You feel the need to help her out, too?”

“No, sir. With all due respect to the lady, I don’t carry people’s packages.”

“She ain’t no lady,” Adam grumbled as he walked away.

Paul had to agree, as he followed them. Judith was no lady.

She was a Hertz Woman.

# Storyboard, 1.5-24

Paul was in the same conference room as before, only instead of standing he was sitting. It had been Arnold's first word when he and Adam arrived, pointing to the comfortable chair that had been set to the side. The tiger had managed to imply in that one word that if Paul didn't comply, there would be chains involved.

Or maybe that only came from the amount of threats Paul had heard thrown at one another by the brothers.

"You're going to be happy to know," Arnold said in a tone that made it clear Paul's opinion didn't matter. "That I've finally figured out what to do with you."

Alex coughed and was ignored.

"You, Paul, are going to be our family representative in this little war the Practitioner roo dragged the cheetah into, because you just know that he's going to come asking for us to help."

Paul frowned. "I don't think Grant forced-"

"Are you saying you aren't interested in helping him and the rest of his ragtagged group?" Arnold asked. "I thought they were your friends."

Paul waited for the tiger to throw up with how painful it looked to say that word. And said, "Of course," when it didn't happen.

The satisfied smirk a few of his... cousins- that was biologically accurate at least- gave him said he might have answered too quickly. Not that taking his time answering would change the answer. Paul wasn't sure he could help, now that the 'big guns' were involved, but the idea of sitting at home, waiting for news of what had happened to Thomas or any of the others he knew who would take part in whatever was coming, didn't sit well with him.

"So, you're going to be in charge of a deployment of some of our best Royal Security men," Arnold said, reading the table top before him.

"Of course, you're sending my men into this mess."

“Okay, change of plans,” Arnold continued without hesitation. “Aiden, let Brislow know Aaron isn’t interested in lending assistance, and that I’m going to need more time to find-”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t willing!” Aaron yelled. “I just don’t appreciate how you take for granted how my men are yours to play around with. It’s been ten fucking years, when are you going to accept that Royal is mine; you gave it to me!”

“What am I telling the cheetah?” Aiden asked, phone to his ear.

“Put that thing away,” Aaron said. “We all know you aren’t actually on the phone with him. This is just Arnie’s attempt at manipulating me.”

Aiden looked at Arnold, who shrugged.

“I’m sorry for distributing him, Louise,” he said. “Let Mister Brislow know we will be sending him the list of operatives when he’s ready to move.” He pocketed his phone and ignored the horrified look Aaron was giving him.

Paul tried to figure out if it had been an act, but he didn’t know these people well enough. He didn’t put it past any of them to do this just to mess with one another, though.

He knew them well enough for that; knowing that much only took five minutes.

“I don’t mean to sound... impertinent,” Paul said. “But do you really need me to be in charge of those people? I’m a biochemist. The extent of my experience in combat was mainly gained over the last week and can be summed up with, I lost consciousness a lot.”

“We’re going to address that in a bit,” Arnold said. “And yes, you need to be in charge. An Orr has to be in charge. Since it can’t be one of us, it’s got to be you.” He added in a grumble, “I fucking help save the world and the fucking Society still treats us like nothing more than second rat criminals.”

Paul wasn’t sure if the anger was about being treated like criminals, or second rate.

“And why can’t one of you do it?” he asked, trying not to think of how they’d rather sacrifice him than put their necks on the line.

“Because someone was an ego filled idio,” Anakin said. He wasn’t looking at his phone this time, but whatever his eyes were glued to on the table top was far more

interesting than the meeting.

“I didn’t-” Aiden started. “Oh, you’re not referring to my ego this time.”

“I’m referring to horse dick over there.”

“Our brother,” Alex said, “got it in his head, for some stupid reason, that he wasn’t hung well enough.”

“Like anyone in our family has a small cock,” Adam said.

Albert looked at Paul. “Are you going to be the exception?”

“No,” Paul protested. He was small compared to Dietrich, but that was because everything about the man was oversized.

“Anyway,” Alex continued. “Because he can’t get it reversed anymore, our sons’ initiation, which should have taken place at least two years ago, had to be postponed. We can’t take a chance one of us will die before that happens.”

“Oh, fuck off. You guys are just jealous of my cock.” Aaron grabbed his crotch and shook it. “You all love getting fucked by it.”

“No, I don’t,” they all said in unison.

“Okay,” Paul said in the ensuing glaring. If one of them died before the son was initiated, it meant they wouldn’t have access to their power or even just magic. Paul understood their reluctance now. It did make him wonder how big Aaron was if it was forcing them to wait.

“Good,” Arnold said, glaring at Aaron for a few more seconds before focusing on Paul. “Then, all that’s left to do, before we make sure you’re ready for taking charge of our me, is to find out what your gift is.”

“My gift?”

Arnold nodded. “You do know how, as one of His men, you have been gifted with power. Right?”

“Yes. I can do phrases, not that I know any yet, and there’s my aura thing.”

“Yeah, how come I’m not feeling that?” Aaron demanded. “I thought any guy you wanted felt it.”

“And that’s my genius of a brother,” Albert muttered.

“That’s the base family power,” Arnold said. “Brislow confirmed it, although why yours is broken like that I have no idea. We all have the version that actually works. On top of that we all have a gift, which means you have one too.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“Whatever you’re great at,” Aaron said, then grinned. “I kick ass.”

“You studied biology,” Alex stated. “So that’s your passion? Maybe he’s like Arthur was?”

“Biochemistry,” Paul corrected.

“When has there ever been two gifts that are the same?” Albert asked.

“Never know, Arnie here proved there’s an exception to everything that’s set in stone in our family.”

“My name,” Arnold said through gritted teeth, “Is Arnold, Alex. Use it, or I’ll melt all of your guns.”

“Good luck finding them all.” Alex looked at Paul and tilted an ear.

“Passion may be a strong word. I mean, yes I want to help men reach their full physical potential, and I went with biochemistry, but only because that seemed like the most effective way to do it.”

“So maybe his gift is getting men to reach their full potential?” Aiden asked.

“That seems too indirect for one of our gifts,” Albert replied. “If it was relating to that, it would be his studying that could be his gift, but while his scores are above average, they aren’t significantly so to indicate that’s what he’s passionate about.”

“I wasn’t,” Paul confirmed, remembering the late nights of studying and far too early mornings that followed and how if not for magic his friends used on him, he might not have been able to stick with those regiments.

“Alright,” Adam said, “then what else are you passionate about? If you dare tell me it’s driving, I am killing you right here.”

#####

“I don’t know,” Paul snapped. It felt like the last hour had been him saying that to every question. He rubbed his temple. “I don’t know if the idea of flying a plane appeals to me; I’ve never thought about it before.”

The questions had started with somewhat mundane stuff, driving, which he’d said no. Cooking, which he’d shrugged off. Office work; he’d gagged at the idea of being stuck in a cubicle. Making stuff, and it gone on and on, the suggestions becoming more extreme as they seemed to run out of ideas.

Adam had been the one who had thrown out the idea of him flying a jet.

He stood. “Look. Clearly I’m not like you. I don’t have some innate gift at doing something. I’ve done stuff because it needed to be done. I wouldn’t even say I’m passionate about sex, and considering who’s my god now, you have to admit that puts me outside the norm.”

“So you’re saying there’s nothing you like doing?” Albert asked.

“No, of course not. With the right guy, I like sex. Fuck I’ll dance at the drop of a good beat. I like good food, and-”

“Fuck it! This is a waste of time!” Aaron yelled, getting up fast enough to send the chair flying back.

“Aaron,” Arnold threatened.

“Fuck off, Arnie. I’m not going to sit here, listening to this wannabe bemoaning the fact he isn’t good enough to be one of us.”

“I’m not bemoaning anything,” Paul protested, looking at the others for a clue as to how anything he’d said come across like that.

“Boo-oo-oo, I don’t have a gift. I want to be like you because you guys are the greatest,” Aaron mocked.



Paul strode forward, his building headache forgotten. “I never said I wanted to be like you. Are you fucking kidding me? Who in his right mind would want to be related to a thug like you? If Dietrich wasn’t my father-” Paul stepped aside the fist.

“What the fuck did you call me?” Aaron growled and swung again, instead of giving Paul a chance to answer.

Paul sidestepped this one too. “A thug.”

With a scream, Aaron came at him, and clumsily too. Paul had to be light on his feet to not get hit, but for someone who’d claimed to be kick ass, Aaron was kind of slow. Then again, Paul figured that this tiger’s gift was boasting.

Every miss seemed to make Aaron angrier, but did little for his accuracy. Paul ducked and weaved, tempted to grab the tiger’s arm and do a proper dip. He figured that would be too much for Aaron’s ego.

“Stop moving!” the tiger yelled, coming for him foaming at the mouth.

Paul decided to oblige, stopping long enough to catch the tiger by surprise, then dropping and kicking his legs out from under him. He stood and looked down at the stunned tiger.

Paul opened his mouth, then caught the motion and was moving. When he felt the tug, he pirouetted out of his jacket, leaving it in Arnold’s hand. He didn’t have the time to ask what was happening. The tiger came at him.

Unlike Aaron, Arnold knew how to fight. He didn’t throw himself at Paul. He came with jabs and swings and kicks and one move that had to be a dancing move. If any of them connected, Paul was sure he’d be on the ground, writhing in pain.

Only none of them did.

Shouldn’t one of them have by now?

Another difference between the two brothers was that Arnold wasn’t getting angry with the misses. His expression was calculating. Where Paul could believe Aaron was just swinging wildly, Arnold was too methodological.

“I think you made your point,” Alex said, “this wasn’t Aaron messing up.”

“I don’t mess up,” the tiger on the floor said, “I don’t see Arnold touching him either.”

“That’s my point, genius. Does anyone here think Art took away a few brain cells every time Aaron pissed him off?”

“Daily,” Anakin said.

“Can’t be,” Albert countered. “Aaron would be a drooling idiot if that was the case. Oh, I see what you mean.”

“Are you good?” Arnold asked Paul, keeping his distance and hands visible.

“What just happened?” Paul asked.

Arnold smiled. “What happened is that we found out what your gift is.”

“I so fucking want it,” Aaron said. He stood and undid his pants.

“What?” Paul stared at the way too big cock.

“Pull your pants back up, genius,” Aiden said.

“Are you telling me you don’t want his gift?” Aaron replied, pointing at Paul.

Aiden smiled. “Oh, I have plans for it. I want to see what those moves will look like on one of my dancers. I will definitely have a few of them for him to fuck.”

“What?” Paul asked again. Was Aiden seriously expecting him to fuck strangers?

“But after this whole Practitioner debacle is done with. What’s the point of getting fucked if his gift’s just going to vanish when he dies?” Aiden looked at Paul. “Sorry if that sound callous, but I have a business to run and I don’t let anyone fuck me if I’m not actually getting something out of it.”

Aaron already had his pants up. “Me neither. I don’t let anyone top me for nothing.”

“Your gift is still going to be useful for the men who are going to be going with you,” Arnold said, handing Paul his jacket back.

“I could die there,” Paul said to himself. Of course he could. Whatever Grant had to

do to reforge Excalibur, the Chamber wasn't going to just stand by and let it happen. There was going to be fighting, and when there was fighting, there was usually dying.

"Don't worry. You're going to get the best combat package it's possible to get." Arnold said.

Paul snorted. "You expect to turn me into what? Some secret ninja fighter with magic?"

"No. My gift is strength, stamina, and a solid resistance to just about every sickness out there," Arnold said. "Despite appearance, Aaron's gift is an adaptive combat sense that if he bothered doing anything with would make him a danger to anyone out there."

"I am a danger to everyone out there," Aaron protested.

"Alex is a master shooter. If it comes out a barrel, he will hit his target with it."

"He's getting my gift too," Adam said. "I don't want him to ever drive himself off a bridge again."

"Come see me in a few years," Anakin said, eyes still on the screen. "And I'll pass on yours. Unlike these idiots, I have bodyguards to fight for me if it comes down to it."

"I will take it, as I said," Aiden said, "Once you return. How do you feel about signing? I can give you a great voice, along with a fair contract."

Paul swallowed, realization setting in. The gift, the gifting. Aiden mention of him fucking some dances. They were going to-

"Okay, that's enough," Arnold said, raising his voice over the argument over who got first go at Paul. "Go to your clubs, work off your energy on your customers."

"I'm fucking him, Arnie," Aaron yelled. "After that fight, I earned it."

"By your own fucking rules, he gets to fuck you. Or are you going to claim you won that fight? You'll have your turn, Aaron, he needs your gift if he's going to survive, but right now he's about to make a run for it because we are scaring the shit out of him."

"You're not-" Paul started to protest and stopped as seven sets of eyes fixed on him. Okay, yeah. He was terrified.

“If you don’t want to go as far as your clubs,” Arnold continued, “then go to the lounge and work it off on the employees here. We have a new member of your family, so how about we show him we aren’t the savages everyone says that we are?”

Only two didn’t protest as they exited. Then Arnold led Paul to another room, a bedroom, in an office building. Yeah, the Orrs were definitely Society. As if the comment about sending the others to have sex with the working here had left any doubt.

“You guys are scary,” Paul said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“And we are the softer, gentler version of the Orrs,” Arnold replied, leaning against the closed door.

“You’re kidding, right?”

The tiger shook his head. “You don’t get this screwed up overnight. It takes generation after generation of absolutely no sense of morality to get here.”

Paul had trouble believing it, but then, there had been mention of how their fathers would have killed a baby if they had known Paul existed. That didn’t speak of a solid moral center.

“So...” Paul trailed off, and Arnold approached. “What if I don’t want your gifts?”

“You’re not getting a choice in the matter. I’m sending you to represent our family in the middle of a war. I intent to make sure you survive it. That means making sure you get all the advantages I can arm you with. I know this isn’t how you like it, but it’s a sacrifice you are going to have to make.”

Paul swallowed and nodded.

“Hey, if it makes it easier on you, I’ll dance.” Arnold dia a few, horrible, tap dancing steps and Paul chuckled.

“You’ve been talking with my friends.”

“I like to have all the advantages I can get. We Orrs don’t tend to play fair.”

Paul looked up at the tiger. “You get it’s never actually about the dancing, right?” He was muscular in the way of someone with great genes who trained practically, instead of only with weights. “You can only dance well with someone you’ve gotten to know.” Paul had

no problem envisioning the two of them, a few weeks down the line, after a few dates, having great sex.

“You saying you can’t get hard unless you know the guy?” There was incredulity in the tone.

Paul laughed. “Oh, I can get hard anytime I want; probably easier now than the last time I checked. It’s just easier to get comfortable with a guy I know. To let my guard down, I guess. To want to be intimate with him.”

Arnold reached down and unbuttoned Paul’s shirt. “Look, you’re an Orr now. You’re going to have to learn a few things about what we do. This, what we’re about to do, it’s not about pleasure, or being intimate. It isn’t even about domination, no matter what Aaron likes to think.” He pulled the shirt off Paul. “This is a transaction. It’s one of the few of actual value we have to the rest of the Society, these gifts we can grant. And trust me, we milk them for all their worth.”

Aaron took off the suit jacket. “You’re still going to have your intimate times, probably not with us since I doubt anyone in our family has the patience to get to know anyone. But we’re not taking your friends away. You’ll get to meet more guys, get to know them. You’ll get to live your life the way you want on the whole.”

He took off the shirt, then pulled the tank top under it off, revealing deep orange and black fur with vibrant white on his chest.

“You want to take them off, or you want me to do everything?” Arnold asked, undoing his pants.

Paul hesitated, then took his off too. He swallowed as he looked Arnold over. Paul couldn’t remember ever feeling inadequate. Fuck, even Chima hadn’t made him feel that, and he had a monster of a cock to make anyone feel small. But it wasn’t just how big Arnold’s cock was. How thick. How hard. The guy had power, was power, and he knew it.

He could force Paul. He wouldn’t even have to touch him. All he had to do was want it, and Paul would be begging to be fucked. There was a sense about all of them that said they had no problem using their influence.

That Arnold wasn’t, that he just stood there with that power and waited was disconcerting. Paul stretched on the bed.

“You want this done and over with?” Arnold asked, climbing between his legs.

“I’d prefer enjoying it.”

Arnold chuckled. “Then you’re in luck. Some of the guys who just will not leave me alone have made strides towards teaching me to not be a selfish asshole.” He leaned down and paused, his muzzle over Paul’s cock. “Word of warning. They’ve had more success with the selfish part than the asshole one.” He licked the soft cock, then sucked it in his muzzle, playing with it using his tongue until it was hard, then he bobbed his head up and down.

Paul panted and raised his ass reflexively when he felt a finger between his cheeks, he didn’t know where the lube had come from, but he was glad for it. He bit his lower lip when the finger pressed against his ring, then gasped as Arnold sucked on his cock head, using the distraction to push the finger in.

“Asshole,” Paul whispered and the tiger chuckled.

Arnold moved the finger in and out as he sucked Paul off, sideways occasionally to stretch his ring. Paul grunted as his prostate was massaged. Then a second finger was added. His panting became heavier, his cock twitched in the muzzle. He whined lightly, closing his eyes and readying himself-

Cold air on his cock had his eyes open. Arnold was repositioning himself. He took Paul’s legs and moved them on his shoulder. When he noticed Paul watching in dismay he smirked.

“I told you I’m an asshole.”

Before Paul could formulate a response, the other tiger was pushing his cock in his ass, then he was trusting, then Paul gasped as a slick hand wrapped around his cock and pumped. The cock in his ass moved rhythmically, the hand kept switching tempo.

“Fuck.” The word stretched as his prostate was hit multiple times. Then Paul tensed and roared. As he came, Arnold jerked him off faster. And Paul cursed louder until the tiger let go and used both hands on his hips to hold him in place as he started pounding his ass hard.

Arnold muttered something Paul couldn’t make out, then let out a stretched ‘yes!’ as he hilted himself deep in Paul’s ass and came.

A heat pooled inside Paul, then spread throughout his body.

Arnold dropped next to him with a tired grunt.

Paul felt... good. Awake. Aware. Was that what having sex with a follower of his god would be like from now on? Thomas had explained how they gained energy in the act of sex, but he'd never described it like this.

Next to him, Arnold closed his eyes.

"You know," Paul said, "I was under the impression you Orrs were unending pools of sex. Watching you now is sort of underwhelming."

"Two things," the tiger said, raising a hand. He lifted a finger. "One. Stop referring to us as different from you. You're family, whether you decided to use Orr as your last name or not."

"Okay, I'll do my best. What's the other thing?"

"You just wait until you've granted your first gift and then you come back and tell me about me seeming tired right now."

# Storyboard, 1.5-25

Paul looked around the hotel room. It was an upgrade from his last one. From the fact it was three rooms including a kitchenette, to the view of the westside of San Francisco Bay and the beaches, and room service... of which Adam had made sure to mention included the staff.

It was the kind of place Paul hadn't ever imagined he'd set foot in, let alone stay in.

It also had a definite golden cage vibe to it.

Not that he'd offered any resistance to being put up in this hotel. He was still not entirely certain how he felt about...

How he felt period.

After Arnold, Paul barely had time to consider what his other cousins might be like in bed before the procession started. Only two didn't participate, and one of those was vocal in his protest when Paul finally left the room. Adam argued loudly about Paul's need to be a better driver while Arnold countered that they couldn't afford the loose lips that came with his gift while Paul was on the field.

Finding out each gift came with a side effect had been just one more thing to add to the emotional noise making it hard to figure stuff at the moment.

He reminded himself that it wasn't the first time he'd had sex with strangers. His time with Henry had been filled with the golden tiger being passed around, but those had come with memories of those guys being friends. It was only after Donal had brought every memory the bat had given him alongside his real ones that Paul had to sit down and prioritize which ones he considered real and which ones were fabrications.

That had been a consequence of Donal bringing them to the surface. They all felt real. If he couldn't find a way to document if a memory had happened, he needed to decide emotionally.

This was all real. As was the understanding he was going to be having sex with yet more strangers as part of granting them his gift of being light on his feet and quick with his



reflexes. His passion for dance, it had been decided, had been enhanced once he had been initiated.

How did he feel about it? About all the sex he was going to have? Telling himself it was transactional didn't help the way Arnold thought it would. It wasn't like Paul ever stopped and decided that he'd only have sex with guys he knew and was comfortable with. It was just how it had been. He'd tried the bar scene hook-up, and that had left him unsatisfied, which led to him sticking with just his friends and saying that anyone who wanted to sleep with him needed to first dance with him.

He stretched on the bed and looked at the ceiling. At least there were no mirrors there. He wouldn't have been able to take a bed with ceiling mirrors right now. Not even to find the humor in it.

That the bed could fit just about every friend he was sexual with in the city was already almost too much. As if his cousins were saying, get used to it because from now on that's what you're going to be used for.

No, that was not something he was going to allow. His cousins might use their gifts as a way to gouge the Society, but Paul wouldn't take part. He wasn't the kind of man who required others to pay to be given a gift from him. Beyond the mission, he was also not going to perform for his cousin's benefit. They could sell their gift. They weren't using him the same way.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door, which he ignored. A few seconds later it came again and with a sigh he stood, closing the bathrobe he'd put on after the shower that had felt needed. He'd had one after all the sex, but he couldn't shake the feeling he had something stuck in his fur.

He looked through the peephole and frowned when there was no one. Maybe they'd realized they had the wrong vroom. He was halfway to the bed when the knock came again.

"I'm coming," he snapped. He reached for the handle, only to realize he had a gun in his hand. He looked back to the bed and the bedside table where he'd put it. He'd wanted it within easy reach, but not on the bed itself, no matter how good the idea of keeping it on him, even while in bed, was. That was a gift from Alex, along with the gun. His gift of being good with all firearms came with a belief everything could be fixed with them too.

He had no recollection of grabbing the gun before getting out of bed. He opened the door with his left hand, put the gun behind his back, and looked out. Whoever this was had better have a good reason to disturb him.

The Hallway was empty.

He caught motion at one end, and before he turned his head, Thomas was in front of him. With a curse, Paul slammed the door shut on his best friend. What was he doing here? How did he even know where he was? He was too damned dangerous to be around right now. At least he was on the other side of-

A whistle of appreciation made him turn, gun up, flicking the safety up. The situation kept Thomas from saying whatever he'd been about to. Although he didn't look as disconcerted to have a gun pointed at him as Paul thought he should.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" he demanded. "Didn't you think there was a fucking reason I am keeping my distance from anyone I know?" The idea that he should punctuate his statement with a shot popped up, and the craziest part was how difficult it was to come up with a reason no to. He lowered the gun. "I could have fucking shot you!"

"When did you become gun-happy?" Thomas asked, way too calm for Paul's liking.

"After Alex fucked me. Now get yourself back out of here before you turn into a sex maniac I have to fuck."

"I did not know that happened when one of them fucked you," Thoams said, reaching through his shirt's collar to pull a leather medallion out."

"And it's too late for him," a high voice said. "He's already a sex maniac." Roland poked his head out of the best pocket.

"Magical protection," Thomas said. "Made by Denton Brislow himself, so you know it's better than anything you're putting out."

Roland gave a high pitch whistle and with a roll of the eye, Thomas took him out of the pocket and placed him on the edge of the bed.

"Fine, it still doesn't answer the question of what you're doing here."

"I'm checking in on my best friend," the rat replied. "You telling me 'I'm fine' mechanically over the phone didn't inspire confidence. How are you doing? I mean, really doing?"

"I'm... hanging in there." He looked at the gun and tried to figure out what to do with it. It had a holster, but that was still in the box the gun had come in. He hadn't expected to

need to put it on until they were on their way. Putting it on the table was too hard, way too hard, and he couldn't help being aware it was there instead of on his person.

He'd been told that he'd get used to the impulses over time, but he hoped that would be sooner rather than later.

"They gave me what they call the combat package," Paul said. "And those come with side effects."

"I don't remember Madoc waving a gun around," Roland said, now full size and naked, sitting on the bed. Paul didn't usually wish someone came up with a way for his friend to shrink clothing, but the rat was spreading his legs invitingly.

"Maybe he's had time to get used to it," Paul bit back yelling, before adding, "And can you cover-up?"

"Nope."

Before Paul could respond, the rat had crossed the space between them and shoved the golden tiger against the door. The kiss was hot and needy, and Paul was too busy fighting against decking his friend, pushing him away, or bending him over to do anything.

When Roland moved away, it was because Thomas was pulling him, slapping another leather medallion against his chest. "Wear your damned protection. We're not here to fall victims to Paul's inadvertent influence."

Paul tied his bathrobe again.

"That was all me," Roland said.

"No, you know what's-"

"I still want to bone him," Roland said, waving the medallion. "Even with this protecting me. Paul's hot; what else do you expect?"

"Self-restraint would be nice."

Roland snorted. "Oh, that's good, coming from you, Mister, can't wait until we're both in the privacy of the locker room before putting his hands down my pants."

Thomas's ears folded back and Paul chuckled.

“But seriously, I didn’t feel anything coming from him. And I want to bone him, not him boning me.”

Curiosity made Thomas’s ears go back up.

“Don’t,” Paul warned as his best friend removed the medallion.

Thomas dropped it and looked at Paul.

“Okay,” the rat said. “I want sex with you, but no more than usual. Like Roland said, you are hot.”

“So can we fuck now?” Roland asked.

“I’d rather no,” Paul said, more forcefully than he intended. “And I’m fine.”

“You don’t want to have sex with us?” Roland said, “Your best friend and his brother, and you claim to be fine?”

“Rol,” Paul said, fighting the exasperation. “I was fucked by five guys who seem to think that the harder they pound my ass, the better it is for me. Five guys I don’t actually know,” he added as the rat opened his mouth. That subdued Roland.

“I thought you said you got the combat package,” Thomas said. “That’s only three of them, or so Madoc said.”

Paul nodded. “Albert and Aiden didn’t want to be left out, but I’m not singing, so I’m thinking all he did was fuck me. I haven’t been around anything resembling art, so I don’t know about Albert.”

“Will you take an update on the situation then?” Thomas asked.

“Yes.” Paul headed to the kitchenette and opened the fridge. Instead of the usual hotel fare, like candy bars, soda, and bottled water, there was a selection of beers in the door, none of them names he recognized, as well as packages of meats and cheeses.

“The Chamber’s upped their assault,” Thomas said, taking the bottle Paul handed him. “Going after Society allies Grant left staves with, which has left them pretty damned mad.”

Paul pulled a loaf of bread from the bread box and cut thick slices. “Are they mad at

Grant for pulling them into this?” He remembered Arnold’s comment about Grant pulling Denton into his war.

Roland grabbed a slice and piled on meats and cheeses.

“Some are. Most are pissed at the Chamber for being unreasonable and just attacking instead of negotiating. Grant is worried that means they’re closer to the end game Wassa talked about than we thought. After all, if they are about to kill all the gods, why worry about angering a few groups of followers here and there.”

Paul nodded, eating the quickly put-together sandwich and drinking the beer. It wasn’t horrible.

“Tell him about Wuhan,” Roland said before stealing a sip from his brother’s bottle.

“She claimed the staff that was with the Xu.”

“I thought people already part of a faction can’t handle a staff.”

“She’s Guan,” Roland said. “Not Covent. And now she’s a Practitioner with a kick-ass Amazonian staff. She was already an amazon, so it makes sense.”

“You’ll get to meet her. She’s coming with us to El Salvador.”

“We’re going to be watching Grant reforge fucking Excalibur,” Roland said, grinning.

Thomas nodded. “He and Wassa have worked out what’s needed.

“And it’s in El Salvador?”

“That or Iceland, but we know the Chamber has the dormant volcano there under watch, so they’re going for Lake Ilopango.”

“Okay, I’m lost. What’s the common point between a volcano and a lake? And either to Excalibur?”

“You remember what Wassa said about the Chamber trying the first ceremony in Iceland, and Grant’s thought about how that triggered at least one other volcano and the dark ages? Ilopango was that second volcano. It’s a lake now.”

“And you guys are going there so Grant can reforge Excalibur,” Paul said to himself,

trying to ascertain the unreality of his life that his best friend was talking about this as if it was a Sunday walk in the park.

“I was hoping you’d come too. Even without the upgrades you received, you were there when Wassa was freed and when she told us the story. It feels right that you be there when Excalibur is remade.”

Would his cousins even let him say now if he’d wanted to refuse?

He took his phone from the jacket on the back of the chair and pressed the new number Arnold had given him.

“Royal Security,” a man answered. “How may I help you, Mister Heeran?”

“I’m sorry,” Paul said, surprised that Arnold had informed anyone there of who he was. “Who are you?”

“My name is Ernest. I am Royal Security’s administrator. I will be your contact point.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I was told to call this number with any developments. I’m going to be going to-”

“Denver,” Thomas hurried to say.

“Give me a second.” Paul muted his phone and looked to Thomas expectantly.

“We’re going to Denver first to work out the details. If you need to come back here before we head to El Salvador, we’re going to want to make this room my landing spot, since I don’t think it’s a good idea to appear at the stadium again.”

Roland snickered as he pressed against Paul’s back.

Paul un-muted the phone. “We’re going to be heading to Denver in-” he thought about it. “-about an hour to work out the details of an operation. We’ll be leaving directly from this hotel room, as well as returning. Once I have the details on the operation, I’ll contact you again.”

“Very well, sir. I will ensure that I have a list of personnel available for you to choose from when you are ready. I will also ensure there is a combat uniform ready for you.”

“Err,” Paul looked down at the hand snaking between the robe’s opening. “That’s good,” he added distractedly, before disconnecting.

“I hope this’s okay,” Roland whispered, closing his hand on Paul’s cock. Thomas was getting out of his clothes.

Paul nodded. Yes, this was okay. It would be good to have sex with friends, after having had it with strangers.

# Storyboard, 1.5-26

When Thomas said Lake Ilopango had been a volcano, Paul had expected a lake in the middle of nowhere, not one within a stone's throw of El Salvador's capital; at least if that thrower had a magic boost to his strength. Still, if not for the mountains, he'd be able to see it from the balcony of the resort that was serving as their assembly point.

The resort belonged to the Medeiros family and was their contribution to the fight against the Chamber. Paul was surprised that a family based in Argentina had a resort in El Salvador, but apparently resorts were the Medeiros's thing before Olavo's father got it in his head to rule his home country.

Speaking of, based on the snippets of the conversation Paul heard of Olavo's father shooting down his son joining the operation, it sounds like he's progressed from wannabee dictator to unofficially in charge. Olavo never hid his father's ambitions, and honestly Paul didn't have any high ground to stand on with his new cousins.

"Sir?" the muscular raccoon stepping onto the balcony said. "We just heard from the scout team."

Paul sighed. "My name is Paul, Raoul. I wish you'd use it. You don't work for Royal Security, so you don't have to worry about imagined reprisals from my cousin."

The raccoon smirked. "The boss gave strict orders to treat the Orr rep with the utmost respect. He's going to dock my paycheck if I don't, sir."

"Three husbands and all that." Paul stepped away from the railing. "What's the word from Thomas and Firmin?"

"They found a location we'll be able to secure and will be back in an hour or so to teleport the front team there. Will you be part of the recharge team when they arrive?"

"Of course."

The hour would be to use the sensory phrase that allowed Thoams, as well as Firmin since he was copying the rat, to do the long-distance teleport from the resort to there. Without that, the rat would only do line-of-sight, or go to one of the various other landing



spots he's memorized through either that script or time. With two fresh landing spots, one in the resort and one at the lake, Thomas and Firmin were going to need heavy recharging since it took multiple trips to a landing spot before it didn't knock them out.

With that in mind, Paul, Roland, Kuno, the Guan twins, and Chima were going to be on the last ride over as they focused on recharging the pair here. As for whoever was going to recharge them over there, well both Royal and Steel had no shortage of gay men.

But all that was what was going to be going in about an hour. For now, Paul should check on his men.

#####

Paul hadn't known what to expect when he'd found out Aaron ran Royal Security. Ernest sounded professional, and as the manager, should have had some influence on how the company ran, but with only a few visit with his cousins, Paul realized that the Orrs always got their way.

Aaron was a slacker.

There was no way around that from Paul's point of view. He did more talking than doing. Anytime he was in a room with the others, he complained about having better things to do than whatever they had to discuss in preparation for the operation.

So the dozen muscular men attired in spotless black body armor that had showed up and stood at attention when Thomas had been ready to start teleporting those going to El Salvador had taken Paul by surprise. As had the amount of respect they showed his cousin when they spoke about Aaron.

Either they were two of them, or the Aaron who ran Royal Security acted completely different from the one who had to be dragged to the meeting with his brothers.

"Mister Heeran," the buffalo said, standing as Paul entered, and the others in the room followed suit. The Steel Link and Royal Security men had different rooms on opposite sides of the resort. The tension went up logarithmically anytime they were in the same room.

"At ease, Joseph, all of you," Paul replied. That still felt weird. How the men didn't relax until he told them to. Paul thought that after him fucking each of them to pass along his gift, they would be more friendly.

Arnold had just smiled when he'd walked into the room he'd assigned for Paul to use

to grant his gift to the men who were going to escort him. The golden tiger hadn't been able to roll off the wolf's back, he'd been so tired. It had taken sex with three guys before he could stand, and four more before he had the energy to grant his gift again.

There had been no satisfaction in the sex, other than the orgasm, and with the drain Paul understood the transactional aspect of how his cousins thought about it. It took a lot out of him, and it made sense he should get something back in return.

"We just heard from the scouts. They have a location, are imprinting it, and will be back in about an hour."

Someone snickered, and Paul considered it a win that they felt comfortable enough around him to do that. "What's funny?" he asked.

"You could just say the teleporters are fucking before they come back," the slim hyena said. "We're not the military, you know."

"If you were, I doubt you'd let me stay in charge."

"Actually, sir," a lion with his mane trimmed to near extinction said. "If we were military, we'd have to treat you with respect and deference, no matter how unqualified you would have been-"

"Are," Paul corrected. He might have been put in charge, but he had no illusions as to his qualifications.

"Regardless, that's why I left. At least at Royal, if I think you're about to screw up to the point you're going to put us in danger, I get to tell you and not have to worry about repercussions."

Paul smirked. "But that doesn't extend to calling me by my name, does it?"

"Sorry, sir, but until calling you sir risks our lives, you'll have to endure."

"I could always threaten you."

The men looked at one another. When they looked back at Paul, there was a definite effort put into not laughing.

"With all due respect, sir," Joseph said. "The worst you can threaten us with is taking your gift back, and while I do enjoy being so much more mobile in a fight, I have survived

for decades without it.”

“That, and after Aaron, I think only Arnold has a chance of scaring any of us,” the polecat said.

“Fine, I’ll just have to learn to live with it.”

“That’s the spirit, sir.”

Paul rolled his eyes. “In any event, I need you to make sure you’re ready to move as soon as the teleporters are recharged.”

“Oh boy,” the wolf said, “Your green is definitely showing now.”

“Okay, in what way?”

“We’re not Weak Link men,” he replied with some venom. “We’re always ready to move.”

“Do I have to repeat that we’re fighting together?”

“Alongside, sir,” the buffalo said. “It wouldn’t look good if we fought them and kicked their ass. But we’ll happily fight at their side and show them how it’s done.”

Paul sighed. “This level of testosterone poisoning can’t be healthy.”

“We’ve survived worse, sir.”

Paul nodded. He wouldn’t win this. The rivalry between the Denver and San Francisco security companies ran too deep.

“Just be ready, and don’t antagonize our allies,” he ordered before leaving.

#####

Paul waited in the bed, Roland on one side, Kuno on the other.

Thomas and Firmin had arrived, been recharged, and left with the first group. Eight men from the security companies, four from Royal, four from Steel Link. There had been an argument about how many would go from each, with Joseph and Raoul raising the number of their men who would grab onto Thomas or Firmin. Direct body contact was all that was

required for either to teleport someone with them. The number of people didn't affect how tired they'd be, only their familiarity with the landing spot.

Neither Paul, Thomas, or Firmin, who was an identical copy of Thomas, hand made them stop. Then the cheetah had entered the large conference room and shook his head in annoyance before clearing his throat, and everyone stopped.

The first group would be four of each, he said in a conversational tone, and no one argued.

With all that settled, the first group left, leaving the rest of them to wait... and wait... and wait... and-

"Coffee?" Offered a familiar looking otter in a full suit an jacket.

"Felix," Paul blinked as he accepted the offered cup. "I thought you worked at the resort next to the Medeiros estate?"

"I applied for a transfer. As nice as Olavo was, some of his relatives got a bit... stereotypical in having regular access to a Chouteau ass."

Paul nodded as he drank deeply of the black nectar, wondering if the protection from his family Olavo offered Felix was just as good here as it was deep in Argentina? Given what drove him change locations, Paul doubted he could offer similar sanctuary in San-

A rat appeared and dropped onto the bed. "Firmin," he announced before lying back.

"And duty calls," Paul said as he handed the cup back to the otter and climbed over to the dogpile that was forming on the rat. "You're welcome to join."

Felix licked his lips, but turned away. "I'll wait for the victory part. Someone needs to repolish what all these army men have been scuffing."

The sex was rapid, messy, and highly enjoyable as the three of them kept the cum flowing into and out of the badger that looked like a rat as quickly as possible to get him back up to full power. Then an actual rat appeared on the adjoining bed.

"I need some of that," Thomas said, so Paul jumped over and gave him some.

#####

“Ci tu imagines que j’va te lesser partir et m’abandoner ici, Thomas, tu vas avoir une mauvaise surprise,” the badger said, storming into the room as Paul placed a hand on Thomas’s shoulder.

The rat sighed. He’d done his best to avoid Jacques, who had arrived with Firmin, to everyone’s displeasure. The only reason he was still here was that there hadn’t been the time to deal with the recharge needed to teleport him home.

The two rats spoke with the badger in quick French, and whatever was said didn’t make him any happier. Fortunately for everyone, Jacques didn’t have super strength as his power because he looked ready to hit people.

Felix entered and pulled the screaming badger away.

“I’m sorry,” one of the Thomases told the other. “I know I shouldn’t-”

“Look,” the actual Thomas snapped. “I get it.” He took a breath. “And it’s done. My main worry is that Jacques is going to get it in his head to try and drive there. He saw the maps. Fuck, I hope Felix can keep him here. Gather up, we’re heading out now.”

“You okay?” Paul whispered, putting his hand on Thomas’s shoulder and squeezing it.

“He will be,” a red panda answered in accented English. She was toned to the point her muscles felt like rocks under the fur, and the staff she had attached to her back was the first one to look like an actual staff Paul had seen. It was made of different woods assembled, he had not idea how, but they formed designs that were well done, even if he had no idea what any of them meant.

“Not cool,” the rat in Thomas’s breast pocket said, “answering for him.” Roland was the only reason Thomas wore a shirt since the other way the brother had suggested he go along with them had made Thoams glare at him.

In any event, it was time to go. Grant, Wassa, and Kuno joined them around Thomas, while Dona, Yating, Yahui, and Chima took hold of his copy.

“See you there,” Thomas told Firmin.

#####

Working in the near-total darkness wasn’t the problem for Paul it seemed to be for many others. It didn’t seem to be as dark as it should, or at least he made out slight

variations in the grays much better than he ever remembered being able to.

They'd arrived in a clearing surrounded by trees and illuminated only with flashlights and phones to minimize the chances they'd be spotted. Not just by the Chamber in the chance they had found out what they were planning to do, but by locals as this was a clandestine operation on what was effectively a national park.

Donal, along with Yating, Yahui, and Chima, had vanished into the trees to search for the exact location to reforge Excalibur, leaving the rest to set up a perimeter and see to recharging the teleporters.

For once, the Steel Link and Royal Security men didn't snap insults at each other as they set up short-range scanners to warn them of approaching enemies. Paul did his best to help, which tended to amount to holding the light while they assembled the equipment.

"We have a problem," came Chima's voice in the earpiece Paul wore. They all had them.

"Can you be more specific?" Grant replied.

"The Chamber's arriving."

All movement in the clearing stopped, including the sex.

"Say that again?" the kangaroo said in disbelief.

"The Chamber is arriving," the hyena replied slowly.

"How is that possible? Even if they'd managed to scry our location, we've only been here for half an hour. There's nothing recognizable for a precog to know where we are. If they had someone watching in case we came here, we would have known by now."

"Can't say anything about any of that," Chima replied. "But if one of you wants to climb a tree, you should be able to see the glowing portal they're stepping out of."

# Storyboard, 1.5-27

Paul didn't have to search to see it. From the top of the tree he climbed, the blue light was visible by the shore of the lake, too far for him to make out details, but people were stepping out of it.

He hurried down and joined in the running around as they prepared their assault.

"It is not wise for you to take part, Grant," the seal told the kangaroo, making his name sound like a title. "We are needed for the reforging."

"I can't do that until we know where that's going to be, and unless you've thought of something, that means we have to wait on Donal to figure that out. I'm not standing here doing nothing until then."

Her reply was lost as Paul stepped further, heading for his men.

"Keep your head against my chest," Choma told the squirrel in his arms. "At the speed I run, whiplash is a real problem for anyone I carry."

"I got it the previous three times you told me," Donal replied. "I have a talisman that should deal with most of the inertia, but I will keep my head against those strong pecs of yours." The squirrel did that, and they were gone, leaving behind leaves caught in the wake.

"And I'm telling you, we need more people," the buffalo told the raccoon.

"And where are you going to get those people? You Royal Pain in the ass have suddenly discovered how to shit those? Our two teleporters can't get them and be back before this is going to be over, or did you forget they're going to need to recharge before they can come back?"

"Listen here, you Weak Ass-"

"That's enough," Paul snapped. "I swear, I've had grad students who didn't bicker as much as you two, and if one of you even thinks of saying 'he started it' I'm going to fucking ground boht of you for the next year."

The two trained security officers looked at one another, then Paul and said in unison. “Yes, sir.”

“We’re doing what those who have some idea of what we’re going to face decides. And Raoul is right. Thomas and Firmin can’t head back for reinforcements. This isn’t ideal, but it’s what we have to deal with. So we’re dealing with it.”

“Listen up People!” Grant yelled. “I don’t care what or who you’re still doing, drop it! We need to move now, before the Chamber gets anymore people on that beach, and before they pinpoint us. We still have the element of surprise, so we’re going to make use of it.”

“Thomas, you and Firmin are the fastest we have, get in there and disrupt things. If you find those performing the ritual powering that thing, disrupt them anyway you can. Yating, Yahui, you two go after them since you don’t have to worry about anything in the way, but once there, attack at a distance and from cover. They are going to have some staves and there’s no way to know what they’ll do before they use them on you. Don’t make yourselves targets.”

“Everyone else, start moving. The longer we take to reach that portal, the harder it’s going to be to take it down.”

“You heard the man,” Raoul yelled. “Move it.”

Paul ran after the raccoon, checking that his gun was active and unlocked, with his men in tow.

#####

Mishaps from running in the dark with nothing more than a flashlight for illumination was surprisingly low. Paul tripped twice, but barely staggered before regaining his footing and was running again.

He caught sight of Wuhan in the moving lights, and the red panda moved as if the trees weren’t there, ducking and weaving around them as if she knew the layout of the terrain.

When they reached the beach, it was already in chaos, men and women looking around for targets to fire on. Behind them, the portal was a cat-like pupil in the center of blue lighting, with clear daylight visible from wherever more people were coming from.

An exploding fireball told them at least one of the kinds of staves on the battlefield, but most of those Paul saw were armed with machine guns that were being pointed in their



direction.

A wall of ice formed as Paul ducked and ran to the side, then it cracked under the gunfire. When Paul cleared it, he was returning fire, heading for an SUV to give him cover. On the other side of the ice barricade a wall of sand met one of water and exploded up.

The thought of all that mud in someone's fur being a bitch to clean popped in his head, and was immediately shoved away by the woman tackling him. He rolled, kicking her off him, then was on his feet, ducking under her punch. He raised his gun and she kicked it out of his hands.

"You bitch!" He yelled as he swung. She caught his arm with a smirk, and pulled him off balance. Paul moved with the pull, then turned and planted his elbow in her side. He moved as she kept trying to hit him in something that was more like how Arnold had fought than Aaron, but as she moved, Paul found himself understanding what she was going for and how she was doing it.

He dodged the punch, then grabbed her arm and punched the armpit as hard as he could. She kicked him, and when he rolled to his feet her left arm hung at her side. She snarled at him, then the side of her head exploded.

"You okay, boss?" The wolf asked, and Paul buried the flash of anger at his opponent being taken down by someone else.

"Yeah, thanks."

Behind them, Wuhan moved among the Chamber, and Paul couldn't look away. The way she fought, the way she used her staff as a weapon and something to propel herself towards her enemies, it just didn't... it couldn't make sense.

Some part of him said those were martial art moves, as with a swipe of the staff, she sent the dozen of people around her flying and in the same motion planted the staff down and flew up towards another group, somersaulting, then landing, kicking and punching as more people flew away.

They had to be martial art moves, but why couldn't he make sense of it.

"Boss?" the wolf asked, sounding worried, just as Wuhan threw herself in the air, away from the incoming fireball.

The pause in the fight left Paul look away. "We need to find Grant, he and Wassa have to be protected."

“I don’t think those two exactly need anyone’s help.” He pointed to the shore, where water was moving like a giant whip, smashing into people.

Paul snatched the machine gun out of the wolf’s hands, put the butt to his shoulder, and pressed the trigger gently. The ocelot who had been sneaking behind the seal dropped.

“Fuck,” the wolf exclaimed.

“How about we don’t get overconfident?”

He handed the machine gun back and ran towards the kangaroo and seal, picking up a rifle someone dropped on the way, then he ducked as a smoking rat appeared, flying through the air in his direction.

“Thomas!”

Paul forgot about Grant and Wassa and ran towards where his best friend had crashed, his speed making a furrow in the sand.

“Oh dear God.” He fought the bile down, as instead of a rat he found a badger at the impact sight, his skin bubbling off. It wasn’t burned, it was... melting?

A hand pulled him away. “I know that’s rough, but we don’t have the time, the wolf said.

Paul swallowed more bile and nodded.

Ahead fire was fighting ice, balls after balls of angry red hitting the calm blue. Paul made it behind the wall, feeling the momentary inferno. Kuno had his eyes fixed on the water Wassa was sending before him and adding it to the wall of ice.

A rat appeared and had his hands on his knees, panting, before Paul was hoisting him in his arms. “Thoams, you’re okay.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I have it!” Donal exclaimed, appearing in a cloud of sand as Chima stopped. The squirrel coughed out sand. “But you aren’t going to like it.” Chima put him down and Donal wobbled for a second before steadying.

“Where is it?” Grant asked, and Donal pointed at the lake.

Paul scanned it with the others.

“There’s nothing there, just water,” the kangaroo said.

“Yeah, it’s under it. About a hundred feet from the center southward. It feels like a cavern, and it’s at the end of it.”

“I can move the water easily, but maintaining it might be beyond me,” Wassa said.

“If someone can get the fire throwing bastard off me,” Kuno said, “I can help with that.”

“On it,” Yating and Yahui said in unison, before running through the wall of ice before anyone could stop them.

“Hate to add to the problems,” Thomas said, “But there’s no one on this side powering the portal. I was able to pop in front of it in the lull behind incomings, and there’s something on the other side. I couldn’t stay long enough to get details, but if I can get in front again, I think that’s going to count as line of sight and I can pop on the other side and disrupt-”

“I’ve got this,” Chima said, then was gone, a wall of sand falling to the ground in his wake.

“Doesn’t anyone wait to at least get help, anymore?” Grant complained.

“When have you ever known kids to wait for help?” Donal demanded.

“Hey, old man,” Thomas replied. “Some respect for the younger generation here.”

“Fuck me, kid.” The squirrel smirked.

“Oh, when this is over, you aren’t-”

“Can we focus?” the kangaroo demanded. “Sort of life or death here. Even if Chima closes the portal, that leaves a lot of them on our side. I counted seven staff wielders, with the most physically destructive staves I’ve ever encountered. We need to-”

“You need to get down there and remake that sword,” Thomas said. “We’re dealing

with everyone here. You go do the world saving shit.”

“Thomas,” Grant said, exasperated. “This isn’t-”

“We need to move,” Kuno said, stepping away from the wall of ice. “I don’t know how long the twins will keep fire guy busy, but no one wants to be here when they start blasting the wall without me and Wassa here to maintain it.”

“The children speak reason, Grant,” the seal said. “This is greater than anyone of them.”

“Fuck,” the kangaroo stomped the sand with a foot. “I did not sign up to get them killed.”

“Hey, how about you show some trust?” a suddenly grown Roland said. “We might not all be big shots, but we didn’t come here thinking we were going to summer camp. You have your job, we have ours.” He made a shooing motion. “Get to it.”

“This isn’t-” the portal’s light flickered, failed, came back, then failed again.

The beach became silent and Paul looked around expectantly.

“I think he’s stuck on the other side,” Roland said in a hushed tone.

“If he survived,” the wolf at Paul’s side said.

“Don’t even think that,” Thomas said. “He’s Chima, he isn’t just fast, he’s... you have no idea.”

“Grant,” Kuno said, “I know this sucks, but we have to move now, while they are realizing they don’t have a way out anymore.”

“Fine,” the kangaroo snapped. “Donal, you’re with us.”

“I think...”

“Oh don’t even pretend you want to be out here when the fighting starts up, and I need you to guide us to where I have to be and hope I’m going to actually be able to make this happen.”

“We need to find as many of the others,” Paul told his companions as Kuno and the

practitioners started to walk into the lake, “and take down anyone we can, with or without a staff.” He didn’t wait for comments. Kuno was right, they had minutes, if even that, to take advantage of the confusion. He didn’t have the combat experience the Margay did, but he expected that with no way out, in case things went bad for them, they were going to fight even harder to make sure they won.

He fired at the first Chamber who turned in their direction. He didn’t wait for a gun to be raised, a word to be uttered. He knew them to be capable of killing without remorse, and he wasn’t taking the chance someone at his side would die due to his inaction.

That snapped the Chamber out of their stunned state, but it also signaled to his allies where he was. By the time he reached the red panda holding the body of his twin, gunshots were regular.

“Yat?” Paul asked, and the panda shook his head. “Yahui, we need to move. There’s a lot more of them than there are of us.”

“I’ve never been alone.”

Paul placed a hand on his shoulder. “You aren’t alone, Yahui. We’re still here.”

“Won’t be for long,” the world said, his fire coming faster, “if we stay here.”

“Not helping.”

“Sorry boss, but I’m way more interested in keeping us alive than in soothing-Oh shit!” The world draped himself over Paul, then a torrent of sand was over them, sand blasting everything smooth... except them?

Surprised, Paul raised his hand and watched as sand passed through it. He looked at Yahui. Neither pandas had ever been able to phase someone with them as far as Paul knew. He looked at Yahui, he was looking in the direction the blast came from, angrily.

When the sand storm stopped, a woman holding a pillar of sandstone blocks held together with thick woven cloth was staring at them.

“How are we still alive?” the wolf asked.

“Magic,” Paul answered, as Yahui stood. “Yahui.” He tried to grab him, as the panda stepped towards the woman, but his hand passed through him. With a curse he followed, firing at Chamber who were also releasing the storm hadn’t killed them.

Paul was changing magazines when Yahui caught up to the woman, who was blasting him with poor excuses of sand blasts compared to what they'd just survived. They went through the panda, as did the bullets.

Yahui's body hid his punch from Paul's view, but when he pulled his arm back, the hand was bloody, and Paul was certain he was holding something in it. He decided not to think on what that would be, as he was under fire as people were deciding the panda was a waste of time.

"Boss, we need to-"

Thomas grabbed them.

"-go."

"Before you say anything," the rat said, "We need to keep them from the lake."

They were behind a line of pickups and SUVs turned on their side. The lake was at their back, the Chamber on the other side of the barricade.

"Kuno had to leave an opening for both air and their way out since there's no way to know what Grant's going to be like once he's done."

"We need to keep them from going in," Paul said.

"I don't know if anyone noticed," the wolf said, "but that's a fucking big lake. They could get in from anywhere."

"Only if they happen to have the power on hand now that they're portalless, but just in case that's why John here pulled this together," Roland said. "He's telekinetic." The basset hound nodded at them. "It's big and we're behind it shooting at them, so they'll tunnel vision here before anywhere else, right?"

The wolf shook his head. "You know what. I've been around magic folk too much, because that reasoning doesn't sound absolutely bat shit to me right now." He turned and found an opening to put his machine gun through. "That's still a fuck load of bad guys," he muttered, "And I don't have a lot of ammo left."

"That's my job," Thomas said, then vanished.

Paul found a place to position the rifle where he could still use the sight and lined up his first shot.

#####

The morning light was at their back as it shone over the mountains. Paul fired again and another Chamber fell. They had been managing their firing for the last hour as they ran out of bullets. They wanted to maintain the impression they could keep this going indefinitely. Thomas had returned from his last search for more with a blood covered Yahui.

He fired again.

The panda had sought out the staff holders, taking them down one by one. The other Chamber could pick up the fallens' staves, but aside from attunement, fear of being on the red panda's hit list was for the moment deterring it. Wuhan was out of commission, either due to exhaustion or some magical attack. Thomas was their expert on Practitioners and staff magic from his time with Grant, but that only meant he was confident she'd get better at some point.

Possibly not in time, though.

The Chamber had smarted up at some point, and weren't standing in the open anymore. They had no mobile cover, but there were a few structures they had the time to set up. Enough in Paul's estimation, to hide a hundred people.

Against one teleporter, a telekinetic who could only affect one item at a time, a panda who was too out of it to phase, a shrinking rat who had martial arts training and a body that could tackle a wall down, and four shooters just about out of bullets.

"This," Paul muttered, firing at another of the Chamber attempting to make a run for the barricade, "would be when the cavalry shows up in the movies."

He reached for another magazine and touched only sand.

The clouds covered the rising sun, too fast to be normal. Thunder rolled.

"I think Yahui missed one," Roland said as the light vanished and thunder rumbled in the distance.

Paul looked at Thomas

“We’re not running,” the rat replied.

Paul nodded, watching the clouds roll over the lake, turning the morning back into night.

“They don’t seem to know what’s going on,” someone said.

Then lightning spider webbed through the clouds.

“Shit,” the wolf whispered, “That can’t be natural.”

The lightning moved all over the place through the clouds, illuminating shapes that, if Paul wanted to give himself nightmares for the rest of his life, looked like monsters moving towards them along with the clouds.

“Tom,” Roland said, his voice shaking.

The lightning vanished.

“Thomas,” Roland said, and the rest of his words were wiped from existence by the thunder that accompanied the lightning bolt the size of the empire states building that hit the center of the lake.

Paul blinked to clear the spots and he thought he heard someone say something, but his ears rang.

Light returned with the clearing of his sight in time to see the wall of mist rushing at them.

He didn’t even have the time to think a curse.



## Storyboard, 1.5-28

Paul sat up, head clear than the previous times he's woken after being knocked out. His body hurt, but it was more of an ache than pain. He used a SUV as support to stand, then reached for the empty holster as he caught motions out the corner of his eye.

The wolf groaned, getting to his feet.

"Pierce," Paul called. "Pierce!"

The wolf shook himself. "Here, boss."

How long had they been unconscious? He pulled himself up to look over the SUV. Bodies littered the beach all the way to where the portal had been. No one moved, but they couldn't all be dead.

"These are the times I hate being this tough," a moose said, standing. "I'd love to stay unconscious until all the work's done."

"Joseph, you and Pierce comb the beach. You get the staves and you bring them back here. Now!" he ordered when the buffalo looked like he'd argue. The Chamber could still be a problem without their staves, but unlike the Society they didn't have an innate power to rely on if they couldn't create the magical tool they needed. The staves were their equivalent of that power, only it could be taken away.

Paul headed for those still unconscious on this side of the barricade, locating Thomas first, and pulling him closer to the SUVs. If the Chamber started waking up before the rest of his people, Paul wanted them all in one location so he could cover them easily. He had Roland next to his brother when Wuhan woke up and started helping him.

Paul found another conscious person, although from the metal rod sticking out of his chest, Raoul probably wished he wasn't.

The raccoon noticed him and forced a smile. "Better go help someone else. I'm a goner." His voice was raspy, but the blood seeping around the pole wasn't foaming. That meant it had missed the lungs, Paul knew at least that.

“Thomas!” He yelled, looking to the other end of the barricade. His best friend was still unconscious, as were Roland and anyone else from the Society. Wuhan wasn’t visible, probably elsewhere on the beach dealing with the waking Chamber.

Paul wasn’t equipped to deal with this kind of injury. Thomas had only shown him the minor healing sigil in what downtime they had prepping for this operation. Paul had practiced it enough he was confident he could draw it properly, but he hadn’t had to power any of them at this point.

It was one thing to be told to ‘push your horniness into the sigil’, but how the fuck was he supposed to feel horny right now?

And there was no way a minor sigil could deal with this. What they needed was Olavo.

He kneeled next to the raccoon. “You’re not dying here.” Would putting cloth around the pole and applying pressure help? This was as far beyond his first aid course as it was minor magic. “You have three husbands depending on you, remember?”

“I kept promising I was going to stop,” Raoul said, “but the pay’s just too good.”

Okay, bottom line was that if he did nothing, Raoul was going to die. He didn’t trust first aid, so that left magic. At least the sigil should stop the bleeding, right?

Paul dipped his finger into the blood. Thomas had warned him against using blood, but the alternative was cum, and the golden tiger didn’t think he could produce under these conditions.

“Right, you’re one of the magic folks.”

“This isn’t going to fix things.” Paul took the raccoon’s hand. It had to be drawn on skin. “But it’s going to make sure you live until someone more skilled than I am can heal you fully.” Now he was happy Thomas had had him practice with a finger.

The sigil looked good. Now he had to power it.

Raoul was in an even worse state to get horny, so Paul had to be the one. He imagined Thomas touching him, but that immediately became the image of his unconscious friend. Fuck. Niel brought thoughts of Roland. Just about anyone he knew had a connection to Thomas, Roland, Kuno- where was the margay and the others- and the danger they were all in a turnoff. He needed something unconnected, something that wasn’t linked to his friends.

Everyone he had sex with was a friend. It didn't matter what memory he used, they were all interconnected.

...no, they weren't.

Paul had a few extra sets of memories. He didn't think about them often, but they were there; they were his. In those memories, he was someone who had had sex with strangers. Who had loved it. Henry had made him love making himself the center of many sexual memories he gave Paul, and that was one man who didn't make him think of his friends. Henry hadn't wanted Paul distracted. In that one memory, Paul didn't have friends. All he had was the bat, and he was devoted to him. Just the idea of touching him made him hard, made him want to feel the bat moving inside him.

Paul opened his eyes, panting, hard, needing to be fucked.

A doberman was raising his gun at him.

"No!" Paul snarled, anger exploding among his horniness, and he shoved it ahead of his run without thinking. The man staggered as if Paul had already hit him, and the golden tiger didn't give him the chance to regain his footing. A punch in the stomach had the doberman on his back and Paul picked up the gun, ready to end this man who would have killed him and Raoul.

Wet coughing behind him made Paul look over his shoulder and he cursed at the blood on the raccoon's lips. He forgot about the doberman and ran next to Raoul.

"Hang in there." He took the hand and checked to make sure the sigil was intact, then he pulled up the memory, and instantly he was horning. He pushed that into the sigil and Raoul seemed to relax. His breathing seemed to be steady.

"Well," Raoul said, resting his head back. "Looks like I am going to have to quit after all."

"I'm sure there's three guys who are going to be overjoyed to hear that." He used a piece of cloth to wipe at the blood around the pole.

"Only until they find out how much we need to cut back on everything."

"I doubt they're with you because of the size of your paycheck." The bleeding had mostly stopped, and new skin was growing around the pole. That wasn't going to be fun to remove, Paul thought, but at least Raoul would live to get it removed. "You need to stay here until someone deals with that. I'm going to see who I can find."

“No worries, I am going to be glued to this spot.” Raoul looked at his chest. “Well, spiked to it, anyway.”

Paul didn't question the macabre humor. He was just happy the raccoon wasn't angry at him for not having done more.

He hurried to the others. Roland was awake, kissing Thoams, who moaned, then was responding, and then Roland pulled away.

“What the fuck hit me?” Thomas asked.

“Hit us,” a Jaguar dressed in black and gray said. “A shock wave came from the lake, and everyone got knocked unconscious. We have four of the staves the Chamber used, and we're looking for more before too many of them wake up. Seems they don't have the magic we do to deal with injuries.”

“The lake?” Thomas was on his feet. “What about Grant and Wassa? Kuno and Donal?”

“I don't know. If that lighting hit where they were, doubt they-”

“Don't even think it,” the rat said. “They're going to be fine. We just need to clear the beach before they-”

A flash of light, bright enough it hit Paul as if it was solid, cut Thomas off. Everyone's gaze turned to the source of the flash; standing definitely amongst the Chamber was a female porcupine with a raised staff.

“You have lost!” the woman said, with a Scottish accent. “Your champion is dead, destroyed by the power he sought to master! If you surrender to me now, you will be shown mercy. If you don't, you will find out what we did here is nothing compared to the pain I will bring down on all of you.”

“Do you think she caused the lightning?” Roland asked fearfully.

As Thomas opened his mouth, the lake's surface exploded. Collective everyone turned around, and from a pathway in the water as perfect as the parting of the red sea, Grant was striding out of the lake holding Excalibur with Wassa at his side. Behind them, Donal helped a barely conscious Kuno walk.

“Stand down!” Grant ordered, his voice shaking the SUV right next to Paul.

“Do not listen to him! Attack and get our staves back.”

Grant continued walking forward right up to the remains of the barricade, and sliced the SUV in front of him in half, the pieces moving away enough to clear a path for him. “I am no going to tell you twice,” he growled, and again his voice carried.

“Is that him, or Excalibur?” Paul asked.

Thomas and Roland shrugged.

The woman bristled her quills and pointed her staff at Grant. It was an unwieldy thing that seemed to be made of lanterns, but it showed it didn't need to be that mobile as an intense light shot from it towards Grant... only for the kangaroo to deflect it with Excalibur.

Paul saw the shock on her face, then the tiger had to look away as flash after flash of light tried to wash away all the color. When he forced himself to squint at the action, he saw Grant deflecting attack after attack as he continued to stride towards her.

She stood her ground, sending a steady beam of light that winked out after quick motion from the kangaroo left her holding two halves of a staff.

She looked at them and mouthed something Paul couldn't hear, then Grant punched her hard and she fell back.

He looked around. “Is there anyone else looking to get some of this?” He demanded.

The Chamber watched the kangaroo, stunned, then one dropped to his knees and put his hands behind his head.

“I think we just won,” Roland said.

“We were always going to win,” Joseph said.

Thomas looked around, and Paul followed his gaze. Yahui was still unconscious, and Kuno close to being that himself. Three of the Steel Link men were injured, and then there was Raoul. And all of them were still what counted as the lucky ones.

“I wish it hadn't come at such a price,” Thomas said.

Paul wondered if a victory that came at the cost of even one life could be considered as such.

# Storyboard, 1.5-29

The whole building was in an uproar, with men and women escorting prisoners to the cells in Steel Link's basement. Only a few had been teleported in, the woman with the lantern staff, because she seemed to be in charge, two of the Chamber known to have wielded staves because Grant wanted to question them about them, and a handful of others for reasons Paul hadn't been made aware of. The others would come via cargo plane.

Paul had been surprised the prisoners were held by Steel Link until he remembered this had been a magical fight, something the general public didn't know existed. So it wasn't like they could be handed over to the police with a list of crimes.

That there had been no argument between the two security companies as to the division of the task had also surprised Paul, considering the rivalry. He'd called Ernest once he was in Denver as part of the first group Thomas teleported, and updated him on what had happened and the prisoners. The man had informed him things were already in motion for Royal to handle the clean-up of the area while Steel Link housed the prisoners until a decision was made as to how they were to be handled.

It made sense that someone had called earlier. Paul probably should have, but until he'd been in Donal's house and smelled the dusty air instead of the humid sand and foliage, things hadn't been entirely real. Some of the memories he knew to be implanted by Henry felt more real than what he'd just lived through.

Paul took over a conference room and sat. No one argued against it. No one came in to tell him he needed to get out there and help out. Maybe it was because he was the official representative of a family with a reputation for busting the balls of anyone who bothered them. Maybe it was because no one thought he could help in what needed to be done.

He was happy for that, because he had something to do.

He took his phone out and brought up the list of the men he had been entrusted with. Twelve, four of whom had made it to El Salvador. Two of whom hadn't come home.

Eric Liebel, and Franklin Cooke.

He had their information, including the contact information for their families. He

had no idea how he was supposed to break the news to them, but as the one who had been in charge, it was his responsibility.

He was still staring at his phone when someone knocked at the door, then opened it.

Roland looked in. "Thomas is about to take Yahui to his family. If you want to talk to him, now's the time."

Paul opened his mouth, but nothing came out. What was he supposed to say, to tell the surviving twin? He was so not equipped for this. He shook his head.

Roland stepped in and closed the door. "I was going with them, but if you want me to stay and keep you company I will."

"You go. Your folks are going to want to know you're okay. Did you call Niel?"

"Yeah, he's wavering between being pissed we didn't call him in, happy he missed the battle, and relieved we're all okay."

They weren't all okay. Paul wasn't even sure if he was okay.

"Did you call your mom?"

"No. She fainted when she found out I was an Orr. Knowing I nearly died will give her a heart attack."

"You know you're welcome to come to Taiwan with us. My parents would love to see you again."

"Thanks, but I can't. I need to stay here and represent my cousin's interests."

"I'm sure they can manage without you for a while. Thomas won't be all that weak since he's used to that landing spot, and there's going to be plenty of guys to help him recharge. He can have you back in Denver pretty quickly if you're needed."

"I appreciate it, but it's best that I stay."

"Okay, if you're sure." Roland stepped outside, then looked back in. "But Paul, don't stay cooped up in there. What we went through's rough, but it's not going to be made better by being miserable by yourself."



“That’s pretty wise.”

The rat chuckled. “I’m just repeating Niel’s advice. He’s had his run in with the Chamber too, and I think he learned from it better than I did.”

Paul nodded, looked at his phone, and stood. The calls could wait. “I’ll walk around the building, make sure I stay where there’s people.”

Roland squeezed his arm. “You’ll be okay. We won, and we’re going to stop the Chamber.”

Paul nodded, but he wondered about the cost they were going to pay to make that happen.

The further cost, since they’d already started paying.

#####

The raised voices pulled Paul toward another conference room. This one with people on computers, standing in groups or bringing food and drinks to those working.

Grant was at the screen on the back wall, moving a map as names of cities were called from people at the computer. The map was zoomed out enough Paul made out it was England, then the kangaroo was studying another city.

“I do not understand why you are spending time with all this,” Wassa said, gesturing around the room. “When what we must find is where they will be holding the ritual.”

“Which they’re going to have shielded so damned hard it’s going to take one of their gods dropping by and pointing it out to us to find it.”

“We do not need their gods, Grant. We are strong enough to accomplish it.”

“Which is exactly what I’m trying to make happen. If I can find one of the places where they’ve warehoused the staves before they’re moved, we can use them as they are transported to find where they’re going to try their stupid ritual.”

She grabbed his arm and turned him away from the screen. “You do not understand how strong you are, Grant. We do not need this. We can find them ourselves. We simply need to build the proper talisman.”

“Damn it, Wassa.” Grant shook his arm out of her hand and grabbed the hilt of Excalibur, which was now in a sheath at his hip. “This doesn’t made me some long lost king with the power to fix everything. I’m not King fucking Arthur. And magic isn’t always the solution.” The sword got stuck as Grant pulled on it, but instead of getting further exasperated, he paused and took a breath. “I get that all this seems beyond strange to you. And I really wish I had time to explain how it works, but you said it yourself. We’re short on time. Information is the power we’re going to use to find where the Chamber is hiding that ritual place.”

“Wouldn’t that be something Donal be useful with?” Paul asked.

“The squirrel is off,” Wassa said dismissively.

“Donal got a sense of where Shila’s phone needs to go, so Denton assigned him a detail and they’re looking for whoever that hacker’s going to be.”

“Speaking of Denton, any idea where he is? I’d have expected him here.”

“Last I heard, he was dealing with the prisoner that came via Thomas and making arrangements for those who are going to be flown in.”

Paul turned to head out- Denton would have an idea how to deal with informing next of kin- and his phone rang. He stopped, starring at the long number. That it was an international call was the only reason he didn’t dismiss it outright. Thomas was out of the country right now.

“Hello?” He answered cautiously.

“Finally! Someone’s got his fucking phone on.”

“Chima?” Paul asked. “Chima! You’re alive! It’s Chima!” he yelled over the voices in the room. “Where are you? What happened?”

“If Grant or anyone is just, put me on damned speaker, because I don’t want to have to tell this again.”

Paul found a slot on the conference table and inserted his phone, then sent the audio to the speakers in the room. “We’re listening,” he said as Grant joined him.

“I’m here,” Grant said, “so is Wassa.”

“The Chamber took over the Diamond particle accelerator and did the kind of stuff to the building that I’ve seen you do to your trucks, Grant. I figure they plugged in talismans and stuff and that’s what let them make the portal to the lake.”

“Chima, listen to me,” Grant said, as information appeared on the table’s surface about the particle accelerator, including a few feeds showing it and vehicles positioned to fight off anyone trying to get close. “How sure are you that it’s like my trucks?”

“How the fuck do I know?” the hyena replied. “Talismans aren’t my kind of magic, but they all seemed connected in one way or another, like you did with all the stuff you put on your truck.”

“Chima, are you safe?” Grant asked calmly, even as he looked ready to panic.

“Yeah, I ran like a maniac once I disrupted their portal ritual and got to the Ogdens before I dropped. Woke up only minutes before I called Paul because the lot of you don’t have your damned phones turned on!”

“Mine got destroyed in the battle,” Grant said, tone forcefully calm. “Thomas and Roland are out of the country dealing with Yahui. Kuno is asleep.”

“Oh... I guess things didn’t just end when I closed the portal.”

“No, Chima. Things did not simply end then. You’re safe, that’s the important thing. Stay with the Ogden, I need to figure things out, but I think we’re going to be joining you.” He ended the call.

“You look perturbed, Grant.”

The kangaroo nodded. “My trucks aren’t a series of talismans I link together. Once I’m done, the truck is one large talisman.” He looked at the news feed showing the large circular building in the middle of what looked to Paul like a running track around it. “If he’s right, the Chamber turned that entire building into the largest talisman I’ve ever heard of. Possibly ever created. And I can’t even begin to imagine the concepts that a particle accelerator can bring into play. Fuck, one of them revealed the existence of the god particle.”

“A piece of the gods?” Wassa asked.

“No,” Paul said, trying to remember what the actual name of the particle was. “It’s just what people called it because they thought it was one of the underlining particles, so it’s not really going to help them... right?”

“Concepts, Paul,” Grant said. “Our magic works on the concepts things contain and what we can do with it.” He looked at Wassa. “You wanted to know where they were going to perform their ceremony?” He pointed to the news feed. “I can’t think of a better place to kill gods than one whose purpose is to collect particles named for the collective.”

The room fell silent.

Paul tried to wrap his mind around the idea that the Chamber could use something’s name as a tool, a weapon, to kill actual gods.

Denton stepped into the room and grimly looked at the people there. “Grant, can you spare Mister Heeran, or is this where the world is about to end and we need to be running to keep it from happening?”

The kangaroo waves Paul away. “We have time. If I’m right and this is one talisman, Chima’s disruption of the portal will also have disrupted the integrity of the whole, so they aren’t about to blow up all your gods.” He looked at the cheetah, “But I highly advise we start mobilizing, because I doubt they’re going to drag their feet doing the repairs and they have to know the information will reach us.”

“Maxwell,” Denton told a chinchilla at a computer. “I want an inventory of all our assets. If Tom calls, reassure him I’m sitting this one out.” He motioned for Paul. “If you’ll come with me, there’s something I need you to help resolve.”

Paul unsocketed his phone from the table. “I should call Thomas and let him know Chima’s okay.”

“On it,” the chinchilla said, as Denton opened his mouth.

Paul joined the cheetah, and the two of them started walking.

“Are you okay?” Denton asked.

“The world’s about to end, so not really.”

“It’s not going to end.”

“How do you know?”

“Because if it was going to end, I doubt He’d settle for turning my dreams into his

message board. He'd be right here reminding me I'm his champion and expected to do something about this." He looked up. "Which we already are, so I would love one night where I can sleep. I need proper sleep still, remember?" He sighed. "This might get really messy, world changing kind of messy, but as a collective, we're going to get through it."

"I wish I shared your confidence."

"Hey, I'm a champion, so you know I'm right." The cheetah's smile faltered. "But not to diminish your importance here, but fixing this won't fall on your shoulders. This is why gods have champions, and people like those two... whatever they are." He massaged the top of his muzzle. "You have to handle more down to earth problems." He opened the door in front of them.

Paul stepped into an observation room out of a police TV show. On the other side of a window was a bare room with a mattress on the floor and a naked doberman writhing on the floor, rubbing his ass against a crease on the mattress.

"What are you doing to him?" Paul asked, dismayed.

Denton shook his head. "That isn't us. He was found on the beach after you got here. He was pantless, begging to be fucked." The cheetah looked at Paul expectantly.

"Okay?"

"I've seen this before, but I called Arnold to make sure. That is what someone who's been on the receiving end of the full Orr influence looks like if he doesn't get fucked by the person who influenced him."

"Okay, so why aren't you getting him to do it?"

Denton faced Paul. "You did this, Paul."

"No, I can't. That isn't how mine works. You know that. You can feel it, right?"

"Evidently, it is. And yes I can tap your ability, and now that you're not radiating constantly, I do know it very well."

Paul shook his head. "No. It can't be. I wasn't interested in anyone while I was there. Fuck, you think I was able to get horny in the middle of that fight?"

Only he had gotten horny. Forced himself to do it. It had been to help Raoul, but

there had been an interruption, one of the Chamber. A dog. A... a doberman.

Paul staggered back.

He couldn't have done this.

'Paul.' Denton reached for him, but the golden tiger jerked away.

'That's what they do?' He swallowed the bile. 'That's the power they're all so fucking proud of?'

That was what he did.

They weren't entitled assholes who just believed they were entitled to sex. If they wanted a guy, they just took away his will to resist.

They were fucking rapists.

Paul was one of them.

He looked at the man on the other side of the window.

Paul ran out of the room, trying to outrun the rising bile at what he had done to that man.

# Storyboard, 1.5-30

Paul was surprised the door opened when he tried it. He wasn't sure if it was because it hadn't been locked in the rush to deal with reforging Excalibur and all the comings and goings from the house, or if Donal had something magical that let friends in while stopping enemies. That last one raised the question of how quickly the squirrel put someone on that kind of friends' list.

The living room was a mess, as was the kitchen. Paul attempted some tidying, but his heart wasn't in it. He didn't know where it was, or if he should go looking for it. Numbness was comforting.

He had outrun the bile, but not his disgust. That has fizzled away when he couldn't run anymore and had to slow to a walk, and the numbness settled in. He didn't know how long he wandered, or what time it was when he found himself at Donal's house. The only place he had even a passing familiarity in Denver, not that he'd expected to be able to find it if asked.

Now, he felt lost in the few rooms there, among the clutter. He found a bedroom mostly cleared of boxes and sat on the bed. He had planned to think through the problem of who he'd been turned into. There was a solution to it, there were always solutions to problems.

Instead, he stared at his feet, mind blank, for a long time. It would have been longer, but he was interrupted when the bed shook from someone sitting on the end of it.

It took too long for his brain to engage, and then he was looking at Thomas, looking back at him, concerned. How was he supposed to tell the rat that his best friend was now a rapist? At least Thomas was dressed and didn't move closer.

"Yahui's okay," Thomas said. Again, it took too long for Paul to work out what that meant.

It meant talk was on the agenda, and not him. He figured that was a good thing.

"How is his family taking what happened? What he-" the words caught as Paul saw himself forcing his will on the doberman, instead of what the red panda had done in his grief. "-did?"

“They’re still in shock over Yating’s death. And a lot of time’s been spent convincing him not to turn off to die taking the Chamber down. Roland’s still with them, Niel too. He was the first one I moved when duty called again.”

“Sucks being the one of only two-” Paul swallowed, the image of the badger’s melting face coming to him. “The last one left.”

Thomas nodded, tried to speak, and failed. He took a breath and said, “I had to bring an Orr from San Francisco to here.”

Oh, God.

Paul fought the bile down again.

“Are you okay?” Thomas asked.

Paul shook his head. “I’m-” the bile threatened to rise again, and he swallowed. “I don’t know what to do. What to think. I did- Fuck,” Paul snapped. “I can’t even say it! I did it and am too much of a fucking coward to-”

He stared at Thomas, who still had his mouth open. He’d said something during the golden tigers raging, and while Paul thought he’d heard it, there was no way it was what he thought it was.

“Well, I think technically, I’m going to be a mother.” The rat grinned. “Sorry for the rudeness of the announcement, but you sounded like you were about to get hysterical, and I figured that was a good way to pull you away from that ledge.”

Paul sat back down. “Okay. Definitely not hysterical anymore. But what do you mean a mother?” He looked his friend over. “You aren’t getting a sex change, are you? I mean, can you even, with who our god is?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t have to. The Chike have a phrase, well a series of them, that allows a guy to be impregnated and carry the baby to term. Chima’s the first to be conceived that way.”

Paul tried to understand. The hyena often talked about his fathers, but it that wasn’t uncommon within the Society for men to use a surrogate to have a son, and for her to never be involved after that. “Chima never said anything about that.”



“He didn’t know until recently. Only his fathers and the few men who assisted did. You’re going to hear about it, eventually. They kept it to themselves only because they didn’t want others to use the method and then, decades down the line, find out it caused a problem. Chima’s thirty now, so they decided it’s been long enough.”

“Your sister suspected you were thinking about a kid, but I doubt she’d have ever thought about this.” Paul chuckled.

“Well, even before this being Society thing happened, I never thought about sex with a woman, and I wouldn’t ask some guy to go through with this for me. So I’ll be the one carrying my son.”

“And who said he didn’t want to ever deal with a kid.”

“Things change,” Thomas said. “People change.”

“I-” Paul started up again.

“Madoc’s changing his last name.”

“What?” The golden tiger blinked twice and lightly slapped his own face. “Please stop, I’m going to get whiplash.” Paul breathed out slowly and ran a hand over his face. “But yes, I was about to freak out again. But it’s not the same, Thomas.”

“It’s never the same, Paul. I’m not trying to equate what you’re going through with what others are. I’m just saying we all change. Sometimes we make the decision, like Madoc taking on the last name Hertz, just like Trevor did. He figured that was going to send the message he wanted nothing to do with Rapheal.”

“Victor is talking about allowing his sons to be initiated. He’s been talking with fathers within the Society, and while I don’t think anyone will ever convince him to go through with it himself after what Rapheal did to him, he is accepting that what he experienced wasn’t typical.”

Thomas smiled. “And I’m done running. I’m done letting Raheal keep me from having the life I want. I’ve had fun with this, working with Grant, helping people, teleporting all over the world, but the real reason was always that it let me run away. I can’t keep doing that with a son, so once we’re done with this craziness the Chamber’s trying to pull, I’m going to look for the right guy to be my son’s father, find a nice place to settle down, and only use my power if I feel it’s important. It’s not like I need a-”

Thomas paused, blinked, and then burst out laughing. Paul just stared.

“I just realized that all that worrying about my major was going to be, about settling for a liberal arts degree, and in the end I’m a glorified Share Ride. My dad is going to be so infuriated when I tell him that.”

“I think you might have exceeded whatever expectations he had for you. You are the most successful person I’ve ever known.”

“The advantage of being the only one who can fill this niche.”

Paul nodded, and in the silence, his worries resurfaced. “I appreciate what you’re doing, but this isn’t the same.”

“You aren’t a monster, Paul.” Thomas turned, so he faced him and crossed his legs on the bed.

“What I-”

“Stop.”

“Thomas,” Paul pleaded, “I-”

“Saved a man’s life. That raccoon, Raoul?”

Paul nodded, then looked away, only seeing that doberman on the floor of the interrogation room. There because of what Paul had done to him.

“From what I’m told, the guy was attacking you while you were charging a sigil. You beat him down, and in the process, you turned him on. It isn’t like you planned on doing it.”

“It doesn’t change what I did, Thomas.”

“No, but it changes what you think of yourself because of it. Or it should if you weren’t so off-kilter about it. You defended yourself and someone in need of help. You didn’t even know you could do it, so you have to cut yourself some slack. I’m sure that once they help you control it, you won’t just go around turning every guy you walk by into some sex-starved slave.”

“Have you met my cousins?”

“Yes, and I don’t like them, but you aren’t them. You just share genes and power. You

know better than me that genes don't define who you are."

Paul did his best to take in the words, to get his rational side to have more influence, as Thomas saddled in closer.

The rat rested his head on Paul's shoulder. "Didn't you tell me that the simple face that you can question if you'll be a monster or not means that you won't turn into one?"

"That's about insanity, dumbass." Paul chuckled. "And it's popular knowledge, so it's not exactly proven."

"How about this, then? Anytime you question the kind of man you are turning into, I'll teleport over and smack you upside the head."

Paul smiled. "Deal." He sighed contentedly, placing an arm around his best friend. "Thanks for this."

"Snuggling?"

"The reality check."

"I never thought you, of all people, would need one."

"It's been a lot, recently. Still is."

Thomas nodded. "What you're feeling isn't fixed just because we talked, but anytime you need to talk, you'll have me and a lot of other guys there to help." The rat squeezed Paul. "Remember that."

"I will." The quiet was comfortable, just the two of them. "So who are-"

Someone knocked on the door, and it opened as Dietrich entered.

"Of course, they'd send you," Paul sighed in annoyance.

"In his eternal wisdom," the massive tiger said with disdain, "Arnold decided it was my job to clean up after my son." He raised a hand and Paul swallowed his protest. "I'm not mad at you. You didn't know what you could do or how to make it happen. It's my nephew who shouldn't have let you get out there, mixed up in this mess."

"I wasn't going to let my friends deal with that on their own." Paul tried to stand, to

confront his father, but Thomas held him down.

“Then Arnold shouldn’t have let you go without at least teaching you the basics of what our influence is.”

“I didn’t know I could do that. How was he supposed to?” Paul tried to get out of Thomas’s hold, but the rat was insistent.

“It’s the fucking job of the guy in charge to think of stuff the rest of us don’t.”

“Thomas, let go of me.” Paul looked at his best friend, who was smiling at him.

“No yet.” Thomas kissed him as Paul opened his mouth, phishing him back. Paul tried to push off as the rat straddled him. What was wrong with Thomas? This wasn’t the time, certainly not with an Orr present who might think this was an invitation to force himself onto-

Oh dear God no.

Paul heaved Thomas off him and scrambled to the other side of the room. “Thomas, where’s your amulet?”

“I returned it since you have your power under control now.” The rat crawled on the bed, grinning. “Come on, Paul, it’s been awhile. My ass has missed your cock.”

“Thomas, that’s not you talking. It’s me. I’m doing this to you. Fuck, I thought I was done with that!”

Dietrich sighed heavily. “You’re going to want to leave us alone.”

Paul protested, but Thomas wasn’t looking at him anymore, but at the other tiger in the room, and it wasn’t playfulness on his face anymore but naked need. Dietrich undid his shirt.

“Unless you plan on joining in,” his father said, “which you wouldn’t need me to step in again if you did, Paul. Leave.”

Paul wanted to protest, but wasn’t it too late already? Hadn’t Denton said that once a man was influenced, an Orr had to fuck him? Shouldn’t that be him? Instead of someone Thomas didn’t know? Paul was his best friend. It would be better if-

Paul was out of the room, heaving, trying not to throw up. He couldn't force himself on Thomas that way. He was down the stairs when he heard the need in his best friend's voice and his mind filled in the images of Dietrich using him. He was out of the house and hurrying to put as much distance between him and what was happening.

Fuck. Why? Why was this thing back again? What was he going to do now? Where could he go?

He called his contact at Royal.

"Mister Herran," Ernest answered, "How can I help you?"

"I can't be around anyone."

"That doesn't sound correct."

"My ability turned itself on again, anyone I find even slightly attractive is going to be turned into a sex maniac."

"I believe you are exaggerating."

"I'm freaking out, okay?" He yelled, and the people around him gave him space. "I thought that was dealt with. That this worked like the others now, but it means I can't go back to Steel Link. I definitely can't be around my friends. If you need to know anything about what's going on, you'll have to call Joseph. He's going to be in charge."

"Very well."

The golden tiger blinked, stopping in his tracks. "I expected some level of pushback," Paul stated.

The chuckle was soft and short. "That isn't what my duties are. If you feel your best course of action is to distance yourself from others, then I will assist with that. Do you need me to make arrangements for a hotel room for you to stay in while this is resolved?"

"Ye-No."

"That sounds like a contradiction."

"Look, I'm going to head home."

“I can make arrangements for a flight back to San Francisco.”

“No, not that home. I mean home, home. I’m going back to Minneapolis.”

“Very well, I have the flight information-”

“I’m not flying. Can you imagine the mess it’ll be if I find even one guy attractive in there?”

“I see. I’m afraid that Adam left strict instructions if you were to ask for a car.”

“That’s fine. I’m in no state to drive.”

“Hopefully you aren’t considering walking there.”

Paul watched the bus drive by. It wasn’t like there would be a lot of people on it, a lot of socializing. He could keep his head down and not pay attention to anyone. And if it looked like he was affecting someone, he could hurry off the bus. He couldn’t get out of a plane if things happened.

“Can you direct me to the bus terminal?”

“I can.” There was a brief pause. “And I will ensure there is someone there to escort you.”

“Didn’t you listen to me? I can’t be around any of the men from Steel Link or Royal Security.”

“I do not believe that will be a problem,” Ernest replied, then disconnected, leaving Paul staring at his phone as the bus terminal’s address appeared on the display.

# Storyboard, 1.5-31

When Ernest said that getting Paul an escort for his trip who wouldn't be affected by his out-of-control ability wouldn't be a problem, he had no idea what he could mean. He realized, as he reached the bus terminal, that he'd forgotten that unlike Royal Security, Steel Link was a security company first and Society second.

Women worked there. He had seen them, but somehow the idea that one could be who accompanied him hadn't registered.

There was no missing the otter in the steel gray ensemble that had more in common with tactical body armor than the business suit it was trying to pass itself as.

"Mister Heeran," she greeted him with a smile. "I'm Jazz, I've been asked to accompany you and make sure nothing... unexpected happens." She had a Spanish accent that gave her words a slightly lyrical sound. "I've been authorized to go as far as knocking you out if you start looking over a guy in appreciation."

Paul stopped short as he offered her his hand to shake. "Really?"

She grinned. "Nah. Just thought I'd see how you take it."

Paul hesitated, unsure he believed her, then decided there was little he could do if she did anything to him. All the gifts he had been given couldn't match someone who actually knew what they were doing.

"Pleas call me Paul, since we're going to be traveling together for few days."

"You have your pass?" she asked, taking out her phone. "You know, we could get a car. It would save us a day, especially if we switch."

"Do you know who Adam Orr is?" Paul took his phone out and made sure the pass Ernest had sent him was active.

"He's the driver. We have a few guys with his gift."

Paul was taken by surprise she knew that much. “He made it clear that if I even thought about getting behind a wheel, my ass would never forgive me.”

“Okay, but I can still drive us there.”

Paul shrugged. “Won’t it take just as long, since we’ll have to stop each night? You might as well relax, too.” He found the bus and headed for it.

Jazz muttered something in Spanish, then followed him.

#####

His phone buzzed with another message from Adam as Paul stepped off the bus. After the first rant of everything his cousin was going to do to him for getting on a bus, of all things, he’d ignored every other one. He didn’t want to erase them, in case Adam took offense to that too, but he was beginning to wonder if there was a change his message buffer had a maximum and what happened once it was reached.

Jazmyn stretched with a satisfied sigh.

Paul understood her offer to drive now, as she had trouble sitting still. She’d spend ever stop walking around, and Paul had almost offered for them to rent a car, but she’d gotten back on the bus without complaint each time and by then Adam had started messaging him and without an outside motivation to get a car, Paul just wanted to keep infuriating his cousin.

Which was one of the reasons he walked by the share-ride waiting outside the Minneapolis bus terminal.

“We could be driven there,” Jazz pointed out.

“It’s not worth the money, and there’s a bus stop by my mother’s house.” He smiled at her. “Don’t worry, you can remain standing in Minneapolis city buses.”

Her reply was in Spanish, but her tone made it clear it wasn’t a compliment.

#####

Paul wavered between unlocking the door and entering, or knocking and waiting. He was always welcome, he knew that, but it had been years since he’d come unexpectedly. Every visit while he studied in San Francisco had to be planned around his classes and his



mother's work schedule, so she'd always known and had picked him up from the airport. Now he felt like a stranger and-

The door opened, and his mother wrapped her arms around him. "Paul, you're home! I was so worried. Why didn't you call me to say you were coming? I'd have picked you up."

He hugged his mother. "I didn't want to worry you, Mom."

She looked at him. "Paul Heeran, I'm your mother. I always worry."

He rolled his eyes. "And I didn't want to add to the usual motherly kind."

She chuckled and looked at him, then noticed the otter. "I'm sorry, hellow."

"Mom, this is Jazz, she's..." Paul trailed off in trying to find a way to formulate an introduction that wouldn't make his mother worry.

"Jazmyn Haleigh Conjuangco Corpuz," she said, offering her hand. "Your son's an important person, and my boss didn't want him to just roam around without some form of protection."

"Are you in danger?" his mother asked, worried.

Jazz chuckled, "It's just a formality. Anyone of important who comes to Denver gets an escort. My boss lives by the motto that he'd rather pay us while nothing's happening than deal with the consequences."

"But nothing's happening," Paul reassured his mother. Not now anyway, he mentally added, so it wouldn't outright be a lie.

"That's right, and I'll make myself scarce not that he's home."

"You don't have to," his mother said. "Please, come in."

"I appreciate the offer, Misses Heeran, but I'd just be intruding. You have my number. Call me when you're ready to leave and I'll come to pick you up." The look and tone made it clear that whatever he wanted, they were driving back to Denver.

It might be worth checking if Thomas was free to take him back to Denver; if he decided to return. His surprise at the uncertainty was cut short by his mother calling him. She was already in the house, looking at him concerned.

“How are you doing?” he asked, closing the door behind him. “After the hospital stay?”

“I’m fine,” she answered after a second of watching him. “I’m taking it easy like they want, working from home, not exerting myself. You’d think I had a heart attack instead of fainting, the way they want me to not do anything,” she added, walking to the kitchen. “Sit.” She indicated the couch. “I’ll bring us something and you can tell me everything.”

Paul wasn’t sure he’d get to everything.

Sitting there, looking around the room that had barely changed since his last visit, he felt the heaviness of what he knew was approaching. Even if they won, Denton said the world might change. He hadn’t said how, but what if one of the things was that his childhood home was destroyed? His mother- he didn’t want to think of that.

She returned and placed a beer down before sitting opposite him. “How are you, really?”

How was he? He has spent the bus ride going over the question, even asking Jazz for her input, since she’d seen far more combat situations than he had, but having his mother ask him directly wiped away any semblance of certainty he’d built

He took a long swallow and realized he had to tell her more than he intended.

“Things haven’t been great,” he admitted.

“Paul, if they-”

“It’s not about them. My cousins.” He saw her need to protest, but she remained silent. “You know magic’s real, and all that stuff. One group’s set on... changing the status quo.” He didn’t know if his mother was ready for the revelation that gods were real, let alone in danger of being murdered. “In a way big enough that those who know what’s going on are talking about it in end-of-the-world terms.”

“They don’t think it’s going to get to that,” he added as her eyes grew wide. “We’re going to stop them.” We. There was no longer any doubt he wanted to help end this. He had to do what he could to keep his mother safe. “We already did something that moves the odds in our favor, despite them trying to stop us, but...”

“Paul?” she asked worriedly when he trailed off.

He let out a breath. "I did something while that happened."

"Wait, you were there? When you say they tried to stop you, you mean you, you? They put you in danger?" Her tone rose as she got angry.

"It was my choice," he stated forcefully to get through to her. It worked, and she stared at him in dismay. "Thomas' involved. I couldn't not help him. And now, if things go bad, all this could go away." He motioned around them, but she understood what he meant.

"But you're just one boy." She said.

"I'm a man, Mom. And there's magic involved. I've gained a few... talents because of it."

"Can't you stay here? Can't you keep us safe from here?"

"It's not going to happen here. So I have to go where it'll be."

"To keep me safe."

"That, and because people have already died making sure we have the chance to stop them. Good people. Some I knew. I can't let that be in vain."

"But you could..."

He nodded. He had no illusions about it. Even if they wouldn't put him on the front lines because no one would want to risk angering his cousins by causing his death, there was no way to ensure his safety unless they kept him from helping, and then only if they won. Paul wanted to be there to push the odds in their favor in whatever small way he could.

"No." His mother was on her feet. "I forbid you from going."

"Mom," Paul said as she stood, "I'm not a child you can ground anymore."

"You are my son, Paul Heeran, and I will keep you safe however way I have to."

"It isn't your responsibility. It's no one's job to 'keep me safe' but my own, and I get to decide how I do that or if I think someone's else's safety is more important than mine."

"You don't have to play at being a hero, Paul."

“This isn’t playing, Mom. And I’m not a hero. I ra-”

The knock on the door had him snap his muzzle shut so fast that his teeth rattled.

“Is your friend back?” his mother asked, heading for the door.

The knocking had been too forceful for him to think it was Jazz. He followed her and was there to catch her as she stumbled back after opening the door and seeing Dietrich standing on the other side.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Paul demanded, steadying her.

“There are some things your mother needs to know.”

“And they can’t wait? You can’t tell her over the phone like a a fucking normal person?”

“Paul, don’t test my patience.”

“Don’t you use that tone of voice on my son,” his mother said.

Dietrich nodded before continuing. “You knew magic existed before Paul told you.”

“What are you talking about?” Paul demanded.

“Your mother’s scared of magic on a level that only happens if you’ve been the victim of it. I don’t remember your mother. I might not be interested in women, but you are distinctive enough that I would have. I was drugged; that explained why.”

“The thing that’s been nagging me is that you recognized me. That means you weren’t drugged, or at least not the same way. You seem to be a decent woman, and I don’t think you would have gone along with taking advantage of me in whatever state I was put into. So I think that magic was used to get you to have sex with me.”

“Get out,” Paul ordered, but his mother’s grip tightened on him. He looked at her and she was scared. More scared than he’d ever seen her.

Dietrich nodded. “I don’t think they knew about Paul. I can’t even imagine why they’d do something like this, but those are two people you don’t have to worry about threatening

you anymore.”

“Who?” she asked, her tone a mix of caution and curiosity.

“My brothers,” Dietrich answered, seeming confused by her reaction. “Donald and Danny, twins. They were killed a few years ago.” He searched her face and frowned. “You never saw them?”

She shook her head. “I never met any of the Orrs who were twins,” she said, then looked as if she said something that would get her killed.

Paul looked from his mother to Dietrich, who was frowning even more. “Damien was already out of the picture, and Dominic is too-”

Her gasp and subsequent covering of her muzzle had Paul and Dietrich looking at her.

“What?” Paul asked as Dietrich’s face became a mask of controlled anger.

“It looks like I’m about to become an only child.” He looked at Paul, then at his mother. “I’m sorry you were used as part of this, but I’m not sorry about the results.” Dietrich turned and walked out.

“Mom?” Paul asked, hoping she’d have some answers for him, but he realized he was holding her unconscious body. “Mom!”

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“She’s going to be fine,” the doctor said. “It’s just another fainting spell. And this time, since you caught her, she doesn’t have any injuries. I would like to keep her overnight since that’s twice in a week, but I’m confident this is simply because she was still recuperating from her minor confusion and the excitement was too much.”

Paul nodded, holding her hand. He’d been terrified she had had a heart attack, even if he should have known her falling unconscious wasn’t how those happened. Fortunately Jazz had been there within minutes, driving a rental car, and the trip to the hospital had been quick.

“I’m fine,” his mother said, forcing a smile. “It was just a lot to remember.”

“Can I get you something?” Paul asked his mother. What he wanted was to ask for an explanation, but if having Dietrich talk about it had caused this, getting her to explain it

might be worse. And anyway, there was someone he could go to for answers, but he wasn't making that call with her there.

"Tea would be nice," she said.

"I'll be right back."

He had his phone to his ear as soon as he was out of the room, ignoring Jazz who fell into step with him.

"What the fuck was that about?" he demanded of his father as soon as he answered.

"Paul, I don't think-"

"I just found out I'm the result of magical ra-" he swallowed. "Rape. And you think your brothers caused it. I think I'm entitled to some elaboration."

"Brother. Dominic. And knowing that, I think I have an idea why he did it, although I wouldn't have thought he was capable of that kind of deviousness back then."

"Okay, care to tell me?"

"There's this family legend through our history, that only one son can have sons of his own per generation. There's supposed to be evidence of the other boys and their fathers dying horrible any time it wasn't respected, but it isn't like we can look back in time and know for sure-"

"Can't you-"

"Who cares." Dietrich was silent for a few seconds. "You are proof it's nothing more than superstitious bullshit. Probably started way back when one of them didn't want the competition. Dominic was loyal to our father. The first thing the twins did after dethroning him was fuck that loyalty out of our brother."

"Did it some good if you ask me, but now I think Dominic might have pulled a bit of wool over their eyes and not be as cured as he let them believe. I think you were his attempt at avenging what they did to our father. If the legend was true, there was a chance your birth would have caused them and their son's death."

"That's... I have no idea what to even call it. Machiavellian doesn't seem to do it justice."

“Painful is what it’s going to be for him. I’m tempted to call him and tell him when I’ll be landing just so he can freak out about why I’d want to see him.”

“Are you really going to kill him?”

The answer took long enough that Paul was afraid of what he’d heard.

“No. The kids would be pissed and then I’d have to deal with their tantrums about how we aren’t like that anymore and all that bullshit. I’ll just make him wish I’d just killed him. Might pay Anakin to fuck him, so my brother has that pain to look forward to again in a year. Don’t worry about it. Nothing’s going to impact you. I’ll make sure Dominic understands you are off-limit.”

“Would he...”

“Me and him, we’re from the older generation. Not the nice one that’s in power now. We can be really nasty in our revenge.”

Paul found he couldn’t respond to that. And in the silence, Dietrich ended the call without even saying goodbye.

He brought the tea from the coffee shop by the gift shop, still dazed from what he’d found out. And was only snapped out of it when he saw who was waiting by his mother’s room.

Thomas waved at them, and Paul slowed. His friend pulled something from under his shirt, and Paul relaxed as he realized it was the protection Denton had given him.

“I guess the break’s over,” Paul told Jazz. “It’s back to saving the world for us.”

“Not quite,” Thomas said, taking the cup out of Paul’s hand and handing it to the otter. He looked around the empty hall. “After you handed that to his mother, make your way to Sigma Theta Gamma. I’m sure someone at Steel Link can give you direction; I’ll be there in a bit to pick you up.”

Before Jazz, or Paul, could ask what this was about, the rat and golden tiger were no longer in the hospital.

# Storyboard, 1.5-32

Paul looked around, trying to orient himself.

Even without the last few weeks' teleports, Paul wasn't inexperienced in them, but normally Thomas' arrival locations were inside a house, or a room, usually a bedroom. The few times they were elsewhere, Thomas was so drained as a result Paul had to fuck him back to functionality.

Thomas was still standing and moving, heading for the entrance to the cavern where the light streamed in, so this was a place he was used to but why would Thomas have a landing stop in a cavern set up as a hermit's home?

He joined Thomas at the entrance and looked out into the wilderness. They were at the broken side of a mountain, and through the light trees he saw a quad deer glance in their direction before bounding away.

Then it clicked.

"This is your fortress?"

The rat smiled. "It is pretty solitary up here."

"When you told me about it, I was envisioning something more out of Superman's place."

"Never been to the arctic, but yeah, this is where I come when I need to get away from it all." Thomas went back in and, after taking a second to admire the trees, Paul followed him.

Light came on at the flick of a switch attached to the stone wall by a bed, and Thomas grinned at Paul's canted ear. "Solar panels up the mountains with broadcast power. Totally not power-efficient, but I didn't feel like running cables from there to here."

The cabinets were rough-hewed wood, as was the table. The bench was out of the stone wall, with cushions. There was even a basin with a few plates stacked on a shelf with glasses.



Out of a cabinet, Thomas took a bottle and poured a few fingers of the contents into two glasses, handing Paul one.

Paul raised an eyebrow. "So, what's up? Because I can think of a few different places you could have taken me for a drink." He sipped the scotch.

"How are you doing?" the rat asked, sipping his own drink.

Paul smiled. "Didn't we have that talk a few days ago?"

"You mean the one your father walked in on? The one where I was getting to the point I'd tie you to the bed so I could use you to my satisfaction?"

Paul looked down, then headed for the couch. "Yeah, I guess that's the one I mean."

"That would be the one where you then ran off to your mom, only to have her end up in the hospital again, after having your father show up at her doorstep."

Paul looked into his glass. "You're forgetting having Dieitrich influence you because of me."

Thomas shrugged. "It wasn't that big of a deal, really." He chuckled at Paul's stunned look. "Big muscular tiger fucking me. Oh, how horrible, however shall I get away."

"You didn't have a choice."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Teleporter here. If there's one thing I always have, is the choice to run away. I'd have paid for it, and eventually I'd have had to be fucked by him, but I didn't mind it happening." He took a sip. "I'm happy he redirected my attention. It wasn't the right time for us and not the right way." He tapped his chest. "Which is why I'm wearing this."

Paul nodded, not feeling particularly better at the reminder he was a radiation hazard at the moment, but comforted in the knowledge his best friend was protected. He took a long swallow.

"You ever get on the dance floor," Paul began, "Expecting to be dancing a nice waltz, only to have a Bollywood dance number erupt instead? And then just as you're finally finding your footing in that, it's a mariachi band that takes over, followed up by Breakdancing, with some Salsa thrown in to make you think you'll finally be able to catch a

breath.”

Thomas chuckled. “Can’t say I have. You’re the dancer after all, not me. But I get what you mean.”

“That’s what it feels it’s been like since I agreed to give Shila a ride out of San Francisco Bay.” He swirled his glass and watched the light reflect and refract in the amber liquid. “I just want this to be over so I can have a night’s sleep without having to worry about what I’m going to wake up to.” He drained his glass, and they were silent for a few seconds. “Out of curiosity, did you bring Dietrich to my mom’s?”

Thomas shook his head. “They have a few private jets, and since you had an escort from Steel Link, all he’d have to do was make a few calls to know where you were heading.”

Paul nodded. He had told Ernest.

“I was in France when you were on the bus. That’s where I came from when I picked you up to come here.”

“Getting Jacques home. How pissed is he?”

“He’ll get over it. I could have left him in Central America to make his way home and explain why to his dad. I also spoke with Firmin’s father.”

“Oh fuck,” Paul muttered. “I am so sorry. I was so wrapped up in my problems, it never occurred to be available to go there with you.”

Thomas’s look was one of confusion. “Why did you think you should have been there?”

“What do you mean, why? He was at the lake because of-”

“Stop. Don’t you even think of saying because of you.”

“Well, I was going to say because of what I helped make happen, but-”

“But nothing, Paul. That talk wasn’t your responsibility. Or being there to support me, but I do appreciate you wanting to.”

“Still feels like one more responsibility I’m running away from. I still haven’t gotten the guts to call the families of the men who died at the lake.”

“Then don’t.”

Paul stared at Thomas. “They-” he raised a hand to cut off the rat’s protest. “-where under my command. That makes it my responsibility to inform their family.”

“That’s bullshit. Which one of them told you that?”

“None of them. It’s just-”

“Bullshit, Paul. You aren’t part of their hierarchy; you were just there as a representative of their family. They have to have some procedure for this.”

“No. It’s my responsibility.”

“Paul, it isn’t. None of this is. Yes, I love that you took part for me, but if you think that’s what’s best, you have to walk away. You have that luxury.”

“You have met my cousins, right? And I’m not leaving you to deal with this alone.” Before Thomas could push the issue, Paul pressed in with the question, “How did Firmin’s dad take it?”

The rat sighed. “It was complicated. Because of his power and attitude about it, Firmin was a bit of a pariah among his family. A few months ago I noticed how he was always me. The few times I saw him take another form, it was someone else. At that point, I couldn’t even recall when I’d seen him as a badger. I confronted him about it then took him home so I could sit him and his dad down.”

Thomas refilled their glasses. “Went as well as you can expect. Lots of screaming at me to mind my own business. Had to chase Firmin around the world, but I have more practice and stamina for teleportation, so I brought him back and he was too exhausted and had to stay and listen. When I left them, Firmin was out of juice and back to looking like himself, and I hoped they’d talk.”

Thomas sat next to Paul and leaned against him. “Found out they did when I brought him the news. Firmin never talked about it. He was very... professional towards me because of it. His dad... fuck, the man barely had time for his son while he was growing up, too busy working for their family. Then Firmin’s power came in and he didn’t even bother trying to intervene in how the family treated him. They were finally reconnecting. He was working towards making amends to Firmin, and now he won’t get to.”

Thomas took a long swallow. “Oh, the Mercier are quick to proclaim Firmin a family

martyr, now that they don't have to worry about him and how his existence can tarnish their name, but his father knows better. He knows that nothing Firmin did in all of this had anything to do with the Mercier. He did it because he was a good man."

Paul nodded. "Yeah, Firmin was a good man."

Thomas put a hand on Paul's thigh, rubbing it. "Once this is over, he wants me to visit again, one last time I'm guessing. He wants to have sex with me in Firmin's honor."

Paul barely pulled the glass away in time as he was about to take a sip. "What?"

Thomas chuckled. "Sex is how we, as His followers, deal with stuff like grief. Or bad news. Or stress..."

Paul swallowed as Thomas's hand moved to the inside of his thigh. "Thomas, I think that amulet might not be as effective as we thought."

"It's working fine." Thomas looked at him. "This is all me, Paul. It's me wanting to have sex with you. I want it because we haven't done it in a while and because I think you need to relax. I mean, when did you get laid last?"

Paul rolled his eyes. "No offense to [insert Madoc and/or Trevor here], but I wouldn't call fucking me back from the point of exhaustion only for me to exhaust myself again 'getting laid'. But it was when I was gifting the Royal Security men assigned to me."

Thomas looked like he had a revelation. "Oh, so it is a gun in your pocket. You aren't just happy to see me."

The golden tiger snorted. "You better hope I'm just happy to see you. I don't think you want to find out how a gun feels going-"

"Let's not go there," Thoams said, then kissed Paul back as he pushed him onto the cushions.

As they kissed, the shirts went flying. There was a snap of a string, then the hard leather medallion was on the floor too. Paul almost protested in reflex, then considered what they were already doing and put it out of his mind in exchange for reaching behind the rat and undoing the tail strap.

Hands full of ass, the ground against his best friend's hard cock and Thomas moaned. He tried to turn them over, only to hit his shoulder against the stone back of the couch.

“I think we should,” Paul started to say, then they dropped a couple of inches onto the bed. “Show off.” He kissed the reply out of the rat’s muzzle as he rolled him onto his back, then let go long enough to pull the pants off him. “How come you never figured out how to teleport out of your clothes?”

“Really? Questions?” Thomas was no longer on the bed, and before Paul could turn around, he was pushed down and landed face first in the pillows. His pants were pulled down enough that Thomas could spread his ass cheeks apart, then Paul moaned as a tongue licked between them, then his hole.

As Thomas rimmed him, Paul ground against the mattress, pushing his ass back against the muzzle. “Fuck,” he whispered. “I need you to fuck me.”

Thomas chuckled, but didn’t stop. Instead, he pulled Paul’s pants further down until only one of the legs was still on him and he could spread them apart.

Thomas moved down, licked the crack, then pulled Paul’s ass up and reached under so he could lick the balls. Paul raised himself on his knees and Thomas moved under him, licking the base of his cock, then up it, until he could swallow it.

Paul cursed and thrust in the muzzle. He hadn’t realized how much he missed having something hot and wet around his cock until now. Fuck, now he wanted the rat’s ass pretty badly.

Thomas moaned needily, then Paul was rolled onto his back and the rat was climbing over him, panting, need in his eyes. He positioned himself, stroking Paul’s cock, then lowered himself and moaned in satisfaction as Paul’s cock entered him.

Paul groaned and closed his eyes as Thomas moved up and down, loud in his enjoyment. The rat picked up speed, tightening his ass around the cock.

“More,” he whimpered, gyrating as he moved.

Paul grabbed his hips and began thrusting, and Thomas went back to sounds of satisfaction. Not long after that, Paul was panting and grunting, then he thrust hard and with a groan came.

He opened an eye at Thomas’s chuckle.

“Seems like you needed it.”

“Fuck you.”

“Already did.” Thomas tightened his ass. “But feel free to do it again.”

Paul chuckled this time. “I don’t think I can give you a twofer. I’m not like…”

As the golden tiger trailed off, the rat’s smile turned into a grin. “Someone’s starting to understand.”

Paul was still hard.

His Society friends could always get it up. It didn’t matter how often they came. The only limit was one of physical exhaustion, and they had magic to get around it when they wanted to. Paul had been on the receiving end of that a time or two.

Thomas let out a yelp of surprise as Paul rolled them over again. Then he was back inside the rat’s ass, his legs over his shoulders, and thrusting. He smiled as Thomas tightened his ass and wrapped a hand around the leaking cock.

“Doesn’t seem fair that I’m the only one cumming.”

Thomas tilted an ear. “It isn’t that late in the day. I’m going to get to your ass.”

“Good thing you’re Society,” Paul said, smirking, “because I’m going to make you cum a few times before you get your chance.”

## Storyboard, 1.5-33

“How am I not exhausted?” Paul asked as he dressed. “I mean, I’m sore, I can feel the marathon sex we’ve just had, but the last time we did something like this you had magic keeping me going.”

“Still do,” the rat replied. “Only now it’s internal and automatic. Sex powers your magic, which in turn servers to ‘power’ you. I mean, you could fall asleep after good sex, but that’s because of how relaxed you’ll be.” Thomas pulled his pants up and snapped the tail strap in place. “We’re sexual beings now.”

The golden tiger nodded. “I think that’s going to take some getting used to.”

“Probably not as long as you think.” Thomas took out his phone and made a call. “Hey, Kyro, can you let the Steel Link lady I’m about to arrive to pick her up? Thanks. I appreciate the offer but I won’t need a recharge.” He ended the call and sent a message before putting the phone away. He stepped up to Paul. “Ready?”

Paul looked around the grotto. “Hopefully we can come back here at some point. I like it.”

“No worries there, once this is over, we can make this an annual retreat.” He took the golden tiger’s arm, and they were in a bedroom.

Thomas let go and opened the door. “Ma’am,” he called to someone in the call, then stepped back in. Jazz entered and patted his cheek.

“It’s Jazz, chicko. Call me Ma’am again and I will break you.”

Thomas grinned. “Got it.” He placed a hand on her shoulder as he took Paul’s arm in the other.

“What do I have to know about-” she stopped and looked around the new bedroom.

Paul looked around it too, the walls were gray, and the bed, on which Thomas now sat catching his breath, was a queen size but only had a simple sheet over it. A bottle of lube was on the side table.

He's never seen this bedroom.

"Where are we?" he asked, as Jazz headed for the door.

"Steel Link," Thomas answered. The door opened and the sound of people running around came in until Trevor closed it after entering.

"Trev?" Paul asked, worrying about more than what was going on outside. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," the rat replied, looking at him and Thomas. "You okay, Thomas?"

"Just catching my breath. Not so familiar with this spot that I don't feel it, but I was fully charged before leaving, so I'll be functional in a bit."

"Why are you waiting for me?" Paul swallowed. "Tell me you have protection. Thomas, did you pick up that medallion before we left?"

"What protection?" Trevor asked. "Thomas didn't say anything when he dropped me off or message me to say you were about to arrive."

"How do you feel?" Thomas asked the older rat.

"I'm fine... shouldn't I be?"

"You don't feel like Paul should have you against the wall and be pounding you until you cry mercy?"

"No more than anytime I'm in his company."

"Thomas?" Paul asked, his tone turning threatening. "What's going on?"

Thomas grinned as if he held some secret he was about to spill. "See, this aura of yours makes no sense."

"It's different from my cousins, yes," Paul said cautiously.

"No, it just doesn't make any sense. Our magic, and that includes our abilities, are powered by sex. The longer we go without sex the less we can do. Except that yours seemed to affect me more the longer I was with you."



“Because you were around me for longer, so it’s cumulative.”

“But then, there was me visiting you with Roland in that hotel room, and your aura was turned off.”

“And it came back on. Thomas, I have no idea what you’re getting at here.”

“What had happened just before then?”

Paul ran a hand over his face, then glanced at Trevor who shrugged. Whatever Thomas was getting at, he hadn’t shared it with him. “I’d been moping around for a while, trying to figure out what being one of them meant.”

“Before that?”

Paul glared at his best friend. “I don’t know. I got the gifts and before that they-”

“You had sex.”

“I got fucked,” Paul countered angrily and waited for Thomas to comment.

The rat closed his muzzle and nodded. “How long between the last time you fucked, and when I teleported in at Donal’s house?”

“I don’t know. Before you took us to the lake? No. Once there, you and Firmin needed to recharge.”

“So let’s say two days?”

Paul stared, then thought about it. They’d arrived, found out the Chamber was already moving people in place, then had been one long night of fighting them until Grant showed up with Excalibur and brought it to an end.

Then Thomas had teleported them back, the drive from Donal’s house to Steel Link and coordinating with Royal. Paul had slept somewhere in there. Then Denton had brought him to the interrogation room to tell him he’d raped a man and Paul had taken refuge in the one place in Denver he knew.

“Two long fucking days, I guess.”

“And now, since we’ve had sex, Trevor doesn’t want to.”

“I never said I didn’t want to,” the other rat countered.

“You’re saying that the longer I go without sex, the stronger the aura is?” Paul asked in disbelief.

“You’re going to want to check with your cousins, but this little experiment seems to support that.”

“I doubt any of them will be able to help. They were as baffled by it as anyone else was.”

“Then I’ll help you test the limits.” Thomas stood.

“I think I’m going to settle for having sex regularly and never having to think about it again.”

“I thought running away from problems was my thing,” the rat said, smiling, “and that yours was doing tests to figure out the exact way something could be resolved.”

Paul returned the smile. “Running away seems to have worked for you, so maybe I’ll borrow it.”

“Ouch,” Trevor said. “Right where it hurts.”

“Use to hurt,” Thomas corrected. “Anyway, what did we miss while we were away? How did the assault go?”

“Assault?” Paul looked from Thomas to Trevor.

“I spent half a day ferrying people to that collider the Chamber used to make those gates.”

“And you left them there?”

“That was the deal; they’d come back on their own if it ended before I was done looking after my best friend’s wellbeing.”

“Thomas-” Paul began.”

“I’m just some overblown Share-ride, they’re the professionals. Once the fighting was done it wasn’t like hurrying back would be on the top of the agenda.”

Trevor opened the door. “Turned out to be a dud. Unlike what the kangaroo thought, it wasn’t where the big event is going to be. The place was empty when we brought through the wards they had in place. Now they’re scrambling to figure out where it’s going to be and making sure everyone remains on the alert.”

They walked by guys having sex and others redyingg packs, and some asleep on the couch, fully dressed. None of that seemed to Paul like ‘being on alert’, but he had to trust the experts knew what they were doing.

“Mister Hertz,” a woman called as soon as they stepped into the lobby.

“Yes,” Trevor and Thomas answered together.

“You’re needed to bring the rest of the people we have at the Diamond Colider.”

“That means you,” Trevor said.

“I’ll see you later,” Thomas told Paul.

“I’ll be there to help you recharge.”

“Check in with those here and your cousins first. I don’t expect this to be quick since they didn’t think they’d have me to help. They’re going to have to move whoever’s left to my landing spot.”

Before Paul could protest, Thomas was gone.

“He’s right,” Trevor said, squeezing his arm. “You should let those who need to know you’re back. There’s going to be more than one trip, so you’ll get your chance to fuck him for how he experiemented with you.”

Before Paul could answer him, Trevor had walked away.

Right... so much for procrastinating. Taking a deep breath, he called Royal Security.

“Mister Heeran,” Ernest greeted him, “Allow me to transfer you.”

Paul’s heart sank; he’s really been hoping to avoid talking to anyone other than

Ernest.

“Where the fuck were you?” Arnold demanded.

Paul swallowed the rising anger. “Dealing with being a rapist, giving my mother a heart attack, and finally getting a handle on how that fucking aura thing works.”

“You got it under control?” some else asked.

Of course that’s what they would focus on. “Yes. I just have to keep having sex.”

“Well, duh.” That had to be Aaron.

“I don’t think that’s what he means.” Alex, maybe Anakin. He needed a way to see who was talking but video conference calls on a phone the size of his weren’t worth bothering with.

“What I mean is that when I don’t have sex for a day or two, it turns on, and get stronger the longer I go without sex.”

The silence on the other end was disconcerting.

“How long did you just admit to going without sex?” Aiden asked.

Paul sighed. “I’m not like you.”

“I hear you’re very much like us,” Aaron said, “other than actually fucking the guy you influence.”

“You want me to come there and beat the fucking shit out of you?” Paul demanded, loud enough people in the lobby looked at him. Fuck.

“Yeah, I would love to see you try that, cousin.” There was a promise in that phrase that Paul was going to regret having made the challenge. He had held up once, and Aaron didn’t have Paul’s gift yet, so maybe-

“No,” Arnold said. “Know you, you’re going to take your gift away just to win.”

“Paul didn’t need his gift to send Aaron to the floor last time,” Anakin said. The amusement in his voice was distinctive.

“How about we focus?” Arnold demanded.

“Sure,” Alex said. “Let’s focus on this. Since he also had our influence, does that mean we have his aura? Or do we think Paul is that special?”

Again, silence.

Paul almost preferred it when they were screaming to when they were silent, because-

The screaming began and he had to pull the phone away from his ear. At least it wasn’t directed at him. He listened only long enough to confirm he wasn’t the target, then disconnected. He’d done his duty to his family, now he could see about letting the people who could actually use his help know he was back.

Paul followed the loudest of voices into what could have been the lunchroom, based on the kitchenette to one side, but was now some kinda command center. Over the heads, in the center, Paul saw projected screens, to the side physical screens were set up and he heard Grant yelling a warning to slow down.

Paul pushed his way through the others in the room. Most were working at tables that acted as desks, with others running between them, providing updates or taking them.

Donal was seated at a table with empty plates. The squirrel noticed Paul and waved.

“You’re back,” the golden tiger said, joining him. “What’s happening over there?”

The crowd moved enough Paul saw a dangerously thin ferret seated before the multitude of floating screens. Paul saw texts and images, then the crowd closed in and all he saw was the top of some of the screens.

“The new Emerald Code is driving Grant and Wassa crazy.”

“You found someone for Shila’s staff? That ferret?”

The squirrel nodded. “Got back as they arrived from England, and the Code has been working with them since.”

“Code?”

“He was a big fan of Emerald Code’s work. Now that he knows he’s her successor,

that's all he'll answer to. I'm not entirely sure he's sane, but he's who the staff wants." Donal shrugged at Paul's frown. "That's what it felt like as I was searching."

"Do you know if they found anything since Diamond wasn't it?"

"No. Wassa and Grant had a bit of a row over it, something about him relying too much on technology, but they sent that aside for now."

Paul looked in their direction, making out the seal momentarily through the crowd.

"Go ahead," Donal said. "They're going to be glad to know you're back, even if they aren't going to give you much time."

Paul pushed through the crowd again and made it to the center, four tables pressed together on which were what in anyone else's hands Paul would call junk, but Wassa was working with them. She noticed him and smiled, then went back to making something. Grant looked harried when he gave Paul a nod of acknowledgement and... something else. Regal, with Excalibur in a now decorated scabbard at his hip.

His attention was pulled away by the ferret who reached into a screen and altered what had to be code.

Paul had never really seen Shila program, or hack. The one truly magical thing he'd witnessed her do had amounted to hacking a gene on the scale of the world. Here he was watching this ferret, Code, seemingly changing programs by hand, between typing and calling out names of places- or maybe people? -that Grant looked up at the screens before him. One had England, the others mostly text.

A smaller floating window caught Paul's attention. A gauge, like the speed gauge on his car, but without numbers, only green, yellow, and red sections, with the needle moving within the yellow, and close to the red.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Denton asked.

Paul stared before nodding. He hadn't even noticed him arriving.

"How are you doing?"

Paul smiled. "Seeing how I left my cousins fighting over who would fuck whom to prove they weren't the one doing it, I'm feeling very good."

Denton's node froze partway, then he stared at Paul. "What?"

The golden tiger grinned. "I know know that my aura kicks in when I don't have sex, and they want to find out if that if something they also have."

"One of them is..." the cheetah shook himself. "You mean they..." Denton burst out in laughter and when he was able to stop only the ferret wasn't looking at him. "Oh, I so have to find a way to make it to San Francisco over the next few days. I have to see what one of them looks like after a day without sex."

"Aren't you worried you'll be affected?"

The cheetah smiled. "I will have protection."

Paul's phone buzzed, and when the golden tiger checked who it was he frowned before answering. "Roland, is everything okay?"

"I'm giving you a heads up that you have incoming."

"Here? The chamber is-"

"Fuck no, not them. Niel's been talking to his friends and-"

"Give me a minute." Paul slotted his phone in an unoccupied table. "You're on voice."

"This is Denton. I expect that if Paul did this, it's important."

Roland sighed. "Niel talked a number of Survivors into landing a hand. They're all combat trained, but there are Stubbers among them."

"I'm afraid I don't see how that is a problem," Denton asked as Paul sighed. He'd heard plenty of stories about the Stubbers and their attitude.

"The Stubbers have made it clear that they expect to have a say in how things are going to happen."

"I'm afraid they're going to be disappointed," Denton answered. "The qualified people will be the ones making the decisions, and since they are only joining, I don't see them having the experience needed."

“Clearly, you haven’t had to interact with them,” Roland said.

“If they’re going to be that much of a problem, maybe they shouldn’t take part.”

“That’s not going to happen. They want a go at the Chamber now that they know something’s going to happen. You aren’t getting rid of them. At best, they’re going to get in your way as they do their own things against the Chamber.”

“Call Irvine,” Grant called before Denton replied.

“Niel’s already tried talking them down,” Roland said.

“The other Irvine,” Grant said, joining them.

“Oh, Niel isn’t going to be happy.”

“I’m afraid that the situation is more important than his happiness. Jarod is basically the revered elder of the Survivors. If he tells them to do what Denton tells them to, they will listen.”

“Will he want to talk to them?” Paul asked. “I thought Niel said his father wanted nothing to do with any of this.”

“Jarod’s been quietly involved,” Grant said.

“Oh, Niel is going to kill him when he finds out.” Roland said. “Do you have any idea how much work he’s put into getting us support because he’s certain his father has abandoned us to live his quiet, ordinary life? Now Jarod’s going to swoop in and get all the glory?”

“I doubt Jarod will-”

“Just to check,” the ferret called from his workstation. “But this little talk you’re having, it is more important than me finding out where all the staves you’re looking for are, right?”

“Where are they?” Grant demanded.

The ferret smiled. “Where else? At the location where they are going to perform the ceremony.”



# Storyboard, 1.5-34

“Mister Kerwick?” the suited elk said as Paul stepped out of the plane.

“That’s you,” Trevor whispered in his ear while patting his ass.

Right. He was Jason Kerwick for the duration of the flight. The identity Code had created for him as a way to hide his little group’s movement from Denver to England. Each team had an assumed identity, except for Thomas who had teleported across the ocean with Grant, Wassa, and the scout team. With a magically enhanced hacker to keep their movements hidden again, they were using the teleporter for only the most mission critical assets.

“That’d be me.” Paul smiled at the elk and felt ridiculous in the three thousand dollar suit. For some reason, Denton had insisted on dressing him and had taken pleasure in Paul’s discomfort any time he looked at himself in the full-length mirror.

Paul had tried to convince everyone he’d be fine flying coach or economy, like most of the others, but no one had been willing to risk his aura triggering during the flight, so he’d gotten a private jet, a cadre of men, and more sex than Paul should have been able to endure. Even with granting his gift to the Steel Link men who had rounded out his Royal Security team, Paul felt like he could run to the rendez-vous point instead of being driven.

The elk shook his hand and looked him over. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I hope there will be time for more informal introductions later.”

“He’s offering to-”

“I can work out what he’s offering, Trev,” Paul said with a roll of the eyes. “And maybe if we have the time to dance.” He smiled at the confused man. “Maybe you can lead us to our transportation? We have work to do, after all.”

“Of course.” The elk led them from the plane to three SUVs, which they divided among themselves. Trevor got in the one Paul did, as did the elk who took the wheel.”

“Don’t you have Adam’s gift?” Trevor asked.

“No, and I’m under threat of violence if I get behind any wheel. Not that I’d even think of trying to drive one in this country. Are you implying that with his gift I’d be able to drive on the left side of the road?”

“I’m more thinking that with his gift comes a desire to always be the one driving.”

“I don’t see you fighting to drive.”

“I’ve had years to be used to it. Elmer, any words from the other teams?”

“Half have landed,” the elk replied, “and will either already be, or be on the way, to their designated meeting locations. There is no indication the Chamber is aware we are mobilizing, but the scouts have been keeping their distance.”

“So they don’t know how many people we’ll be facing,” Trevor said. “We also don’t know how long they’ve been getting this ready. For all we know, every one of them in the world is going to be there.”

“That’s good, right?” Paul asked. “That means we can deal with them all at once.”

“Except that we don’t know their numbers. Grant has an approximation, and it’s supported by the intelligence that’s been gathered independently, but when magic’s involved, nothing’s ever sure.” He sighed. “How long until we get there?”

“Please tell me this isn’t going to be a ‘are we there yet?’ situation,” the elk complained. “I know the UK isn’t as large as the United States, but it will still be hours until we reach our destination.”

“It’s how long do we have to enjoy ourselves, situation,” Trevor said, undoing his pants, “And are you going to need to be relieved partway through?”

The elk looked at them in the mirror. “Relief is always desired, but do any of you have experience driving in this country?”

“I have experience sucking cock from the left side,” the wolf said.

“You should have sat in front then,” Joseph said. “I could be back there getting some ass.”

“You are an ass,” the wolf said. “You called shotgun, now live with it.”

“Find a place to pull over about halfway there,” Trevor said, ignoring Paul’s half-hearted protest as he pulled the golden tiger’s pants down. “I’ll spot you then, and you can experience American cock.”

#####

“Why do I have to be the one doing this?” Paul grumbled as he approached the white-washed building with exposed beams and a thatched roof. “And why a different name?” No one answered him; the others were headed for the motel. This was for those in charge, which somehow included him.

He entered the tavern, which was larger and less gloomy than he’d expected. He should know better than to use movies when building an image of what a location would be like. Although the outside matched the typical Hollywood depiction of an English town pub.

“Hi,” he greeted the basset hound as he tried to get his nervousness under control; the host studying him didn’t help. He so wasn’t built for cloak and dagger stuff. “I’m Heath Gordon. I’m meeting with the Walsh party.”

She looked him over and didn’t move. Was there a secret sign he’d been told and forgotten about? Was he at the wrong one? The village couldn’t have two taverns.

She nodded. “If you’ll follow me.”

He did, wondering if he’d screwed it up and he was about to be jumped for being a spy. He discreetly touched the gun under his arm and felt better. They were in for a surprise; he had his gifts and one battle’s worth of experience to rely on.

She opened a door and a cacophony escaped the room. “Your party,” she said, motioning for him to enter.

Immediately, Paul recognized Grant, Wassa, and Denton who were talking with others Paul didn’t even try to recognize. He’d been introduced to a handful of family representatives while in Denver, but didn’t understand why at the time, and then once they were told whose family he was part of they dismissed him.

Here again, people glanced in his direction, took his measure, and acted like he no longer existed. His coloring was different enough that they didn’t worry he was one of the Orrs who could explode in their face. His anger was doused by the surprise at also receiving respectful nods. Not everyone here considered him a nobody.

“Where’s Thomas?” Grant asked.

“Recharging,” someone answered. “He brought the materials to landing point three. A couple of fucks and he’ll be good to get the next set of supplies from Ogden’s property. The timetables still line up since he needs less of a recharge with each trip.”

“Anyone know where I’m expected to put the last batch of people?” someone demanded. “We’ve filled every hotel and motel within a hundred kilometers. Am I putting them further than that? Do we have another teleporter to get them to the site on time?”

“I can handle some of them,” Denton replied, “but just have them bunk in the rooms already occupied. They’re Society. It isn’t like tight quarters lead to anything more than excuses to have sex.”

People chuckled, but Paul stared. Had the cheetah just implied he could teleport?

“How are your people, Paul?” Denton asked, before turning to look in his direction.

Surprised, Paul stammered. “They’re okay. They were headed to the motel.” He noticed the looks some gave him; as if being addressed by the cheetah was something to be noted.

Denton nodded, eyes flicking around. “Good. I’m glad everyone’s understanding where they stand.”

Paul shook his head. He wasn’t understanding one thing right now.

# Storyboard, 1.5-35

(Make sure to establish that the amazon is part of the group as early as possible)

Even looking through binoculars, the light Paul looked at was only a point halfway between the two armadillos standing nearly thirty feet apart, hands extended towards the light. It grew until he could make out the fire that spun angrily, suspended a couple of feet over the ground. Not even a foot in diameter, and the head was wilting the grass under it.

With a nod, the armadillos shifted their bodies so they were angled toward the old mansion standing behind a low fieldstone wall. The ball of light drifted towards it. It might have increased in size, or maybe it was simply generating more light.

Paul had trouble telling what it was doing, and thermo-nuclear physics had never been his field so when Gilbert and Laurence explained what they would do, all he'd gotten was that if it worked it would blow a hole in the Chamber's force field the size of Delaware. That explanation had enraged the three representatives of England's Green Men.

Gilbert and Laurence moved in unison, something about having to maintain Gilbert's plasma ball within Laurence's magnetic field so it moved as they needed. And the ball drifted up, as if pushed along the forcefield, hitting at the arc of the cone covering the entirety of the property.

Twenty feet up the ball stopped again, and Paul looked down, zooming on Gilbert, then Laurence. The strain on their faces was visible. When he looked at the ball again, the light was strong and he thought it spun faster. Now, licks of flames traveled away where it touched the forcefield and deformed slightly, one power pushing against the other.

The deformation increased, showing where the ball pressed against the field, and as it spun faster, it grew and more flames licked further along as if escaping from what held them against the field. Gilbert was feeding it and Laurence was keeping it under control, the strain told him that neither had expected this to be this much effort.

He lowered the binoculars, the light now too intense to look at, and he could make it out in the distance even without it. It was still growing, to the point Paul had to look away.

This was good timing as the explosion plastered Paul's ears to his skull, and caused

the scenery to lose all its color before it got so bright he had to close his eyes even even facing away from it as he was.

The shockwave hit like a wall of bricks that had trees bending, some breaking, what sounded like a vehicle sliding, and Paul fighting to stay on his feet for a second, then to not lose his balance as it ended as suddenly as it hit.

Paul blinked the spots out of his eyes, then looked through the binoculars. He located the armadillos, being helped away, their location at the time of the denotation marked by the untouched grass where someone held a forcefield over each of them.

No one had been happy with how close they had to be, but the armadillos' range with their respective powers was under fifty feet, so they'd been assigned the two strongest men with forcefield as powers, but since the goal was to destroy one, there had been questions as to how effective they would be, even at a distance.

The Chamber's forcefield was still there, marked by the fieldstone wall that was now melted on the outside with the line where the field crossed it cleaning defined, as well as ash drifting down and landing on it.

On this side of the field, except for where the armadillos had been protected, the ground was burned to the soil. The trees that were still standing were black and thin, most of their wood vaporized in the seconds the blast lasted. On the other side, the grass was vibrant green, the tree's foliage a darker green and healthy looking.

"Well," someone said, "if somehow they hadn't realized we're here, there's no way they missed this."

"Too bad it didn't work," someone else commented.

"This?" a woman said angrily. "This is what you had us sacrifice the countryside for? Nothing?"

The woman was a bear with brown fur streaked with green that looked a lot like roots woven through her short fur. With her was a lion, his golden fur tinted green, and an ocelot, their markings in green instead of the customary black. All the mark of their status within the hierarchy of the Green Men, someone from Steel link had told Paul.

"It was worth the attempt," Denton answered her calmly. "If it had worked, it would-"

"It didn't! Now look at what those two have caused? Do you have any idea how old the trees here are? In a few seconds they have killed centuries worth of life!"

“So you’d rather they live and your god dies?” Grant demanded.

The bear scoffed. “Gods can not be killed.”

“You’d be surprised,” Denton said. He raised a hand to stop her reply. “And regardless, do you think that if the Chamber manages to do what they’re trying, it’s going to happen peacefully? Their previous attempt resulted in a literal dark age. I think the Green Man is willing to sacrifice some trees to ensure that doesn’t happen again.”

“You do not speak for him,” she said haughtily.

“No one does. Now, we can either stand here and argue, or actually do what we came here to do. And since an immediate assault is forestalled, Walter, how are we set up to lay siege to them until we can find a way in?”

An older hog in black and gray body armor stepped forward. “As best as we can be, Dent. The hacker and squirrel are making sure no one inside can call outside or vice versa.” There was some consternation in the tone, reminding Paul that not everyone who worked for Denton was part of the magical community, even if they had to know about its existence simply by the nature of so many of their coworkers being magical. “The hacker’s also keeping an eye on the other colliders worldwide as well as anything that could generate power on that scale so we get forewarning of another gate like they used to ambush you.”

“It’s not about power,” Grant said. “It’s about what the colliders represent.”

“With all due respect, sir,” the hog said, “I’m simply relaying what the hacker told me. I believe he’s one of you, so he’d know how this works.”

“He’s too damned new at this to know anything,” Grant grumbled, running a hand over his face.

“Can the chamber complete their ritual without lowering the forcefield?” Denton asked, defusing what Paul had seen turning into a heated argument.

“I don’t know,” the kangaroo answered.

“If they have the needed ideas,” Wassa said, “along with the required staves, then they will be able to.”

“And how many is that?” the hog asked, his tone matching the eye rolls others were

giving her answer.

“Many,” she answered, tone firm. “But they have been working towards this for as long as the trees here have been standing, if not longer. If they are not ready at this very moment, it is only because they over distributed their collected staves amongst their agents across the world.”

“There’s nothing to be gained by arguing,” Denton said as the hog opened his muzzle. “There’s a few things we can try to ascertain where the Chamber stands in their preparations, but even if we get information, I don’t expect anything will proceed quickly for now. Walter, set things up so we have ongoing watch and rotations so everyone who needs it is fully charged.”

The hog nodded, looked around, and motioned Paul over as he walked away. “I need you to keep your people under control.”

“What happened now?” Paul asked with a sigh.

“Nothing yet.” The hog turned to face him. “Look, if it was up to me, I’d send you and your amateurs back where you came from, but Dent-”

“Don’t even go there,” Paul snarled, stepping into the hog’s personal space, making him step back in surprise. “Joseph and his men are as qualified as yours. We were at the lake fighting them. We’ve earned the right to be respected, so how about you take that rivalry and throw it as far as you can? I’m going to make sure my people behave like the professionals they are. You can do us the courtesy of doing the same.” Paul turned and walked away.

#####

Paul returned to the command tent from walking among the men. Moods were still high, a mix of it being early in the siege and the sex tents that were set up along the perimeter of the mansion so that anyone not on active watch could enjoy themselves.

The mood inside the command tent was more tense.

Denton sat in the middle of a tarp with sigils around him in dark ink. Blood, since it was Society magic. He was astral projecting again, looking for a weak point to push through. He’d tried nullifying the magic that kept the forcefield active before the ‘nuclear’ option had been used, but however it was generated was beyond his ability to affect from this side. His hope was to find a way to get through the field, locate the power source, and nullify that.

Listening to the cheetah explain what he wanted to do had awed Paul and given him a



sense of why so many people minded how they acted around him. He'd talked about doing something that needed more than one power with the casualness of someone who could do anything he wanted, no matter what limits Paul had been told the Society had to be content with.

He hadn't doubted Denton was their god's champion, but listening to him now, he was getting a sense that he was definitely in a class beyond any of them.

Thomas appeared, to be caught by the closest man. The rat looked exhausted, and Paul took charge of him. "No luck?"

Thomas shook his head. "It's like hitting a wall at sixty miles an hour. I just stop and appear on this side with a headache that could blow up my head."

Paul helped him to the closest sex tent, where he helped his best friend recharge.

#####

Paul stood by as Grant pressed Excalibur's tip against the forcefield while Denton sat on the tarp. The sparks the sword created where it touched the field were not even close to the light show the armadillos had created.

"It's no use," Denton said, rubbing his temple. "It's not having any effect."

"You're sure this is the weakest point?"

The cheetah nodded. "That I could find. The property is too large for me to check its periphery quickly."

Then we try this again if you find one," the kangaroo said angrily. "There's got to be a way through."

Denton stood. "Paul, how about you come with me? I could do with a recharge."

"Me?" Paul had tagged along to see the show, ready to use his position as Orr representative to justify his presence. He hadn't expected to be called upon to help in any way.

Certainly not this way.

Denton grabbed his arm and pulled him along. "Don't get all awestruck on me now.

It's too nice having someone around who doesn't feel inadequate with me, or thinks that with all this power I still need to be protected." He lowered his voice. "And I hear you can make me a great dancer."

Paul rolled his eyes. It had to be the worst pick up line he'd ever heard, and utterly unnecessary.

#####

"No," Jarod Irvine told Niel from one side of the table with maps spread on it. "I don't care how good your little fan club is, you will not go with them. The cavern system might be unstable."

"You don't get to tell me, or them, what we can or can't do." Niel replied. "To borrow an old phrase, you ain't the boss of me."

The raccoons glared at one another.

Between them, sitting on a stool, head in his hands, Roland looked like he'd been listening to this argument far too long.

Paul took him then Niel and pulled them away, ignoring the raccoon's protests. When Paul looked over his shoulder, expecting Jarod to be glaring at them, the younger looking raccoon looked at him with relief and mouthed a 'thank you'.

That was unexpected. Niel always spoke of his biological father as someone more interested in his own needs to care about anyone else.

#####

Paul stepped out of the sex tent and stretched. Niel and Roland were still going at it, but it wasn't Paul's first time today, and after enough sex to recharge him from granting Neil and Roland his gift, the other men in the tent were just strangers and Paul had used the excuse of needing to check on his men.

The sun was getting low enough the shadows stretched, but not so much the spotlights were on yet. He considered heading to the command tent, but how much would things have changed in the couple of hours he'd been away. If anything of note had happened, they would have heard about it even in the sex tent.

Instead he did what he claimed he had to, and wandered among the men, checking on

their moods and simply talking. Most were amused by this stranger who clearly didn't belong on the front line, while some recognized him and he got the usual mix of either cautious respect or outright dismissal.

When he noticed Wassa walking into the woods around the clearing where the 'living tents' were situated his first thought was that she was heading for privacy to perform a Practitioner ritual. Only they didn't have those, as far as Paul knew. Maybe, with the seal being from an older time, she did things differently than Grant. But more likely, for some reason, she didn't know they had a tent that served as restrooms, and that one of them was for the women among them.

Paul had no problem believing it was such a normal thing to have no one would think to mention it to a woman that was a few centuries out of her time.

"Wassa," he called, but she didn't seem to hear her. He hesitated, then hurried after her. She shouldn't have to rough it that much just because he, along with the others, had forgotten to take her lack of modern knowledge into account.

He caught glimpses of her through the trees, but navigating them in the increasing darkness kept him from calling after her again.

When he finally found her no longer moving, and still wearing her robes, thankfully, he called to her.

The seal turned and glared at him, allowing him to see the wolf her form had hidden. He was smaller than in person, but it was hard not to recognize the mountain of masculinity known only as God Wolf even if the golden tiger had only seen him once.

"You are not as adept as you believe yourself to be," the projected wolf said, sounding amused.

Wassa replied with something old sounding that Paul didn't understand, and a wave of hand sent a spear of water in his direction. Paul stepped around it and drew the gun, firing three times at the seal before the attack and his response registered. She was supposed to be an ally.

Water rose up to shield her and Paul ran in her direction. Shooting her was an overreaction, but he needed to stop her before she revealed more of their plans to the enemy. He saw the surprise on her face when the water moved away, and Paul felt confident about taking her down quickly in close quarters.

Only she managed to deflect the few blows that connected, as if her body could

move his first before the impact connected fully. Or, he realized, she had a coating of water that let her do that. He realized that unlike Grant or Donal, she had a control over water that was independent of any talisman.

She was a surprisingly better fighter than he expected. He was getting a sense of her style when she managed to catch his hand and water spread over it. Horrified, he looked at the nasty smile on her face as she started hitting him with her free hand. Yanking him off balance anytime he tried to block with his free hand. She hit harder than Paul thought anyone had a right to, and despite his enchanted toughness he was having trouble remaining standing after only a dozen hits.

She shoved him against a tree hard enough he had to fight to keep his vision from fading out completely, and he saw the water form over her fist into a spear. When he looked in her eyes, all he saw there was determination.

“Drop it, lady,” someone said, accompanied by the racking of a machine gun. Then another, and more.

Paul looked around as half a dozen men and women stepped out of trees, machine guns aimed at her.

Wassa looked at them, and didn't seem deterred.

“Dont’,” Paul said. “You can't take them on. They're going to kill you.”

“That isn't going to be necessary,” one of the men said, raising a hand. “Light's out, Lady.” He snapped his fingers, and Wassa dropped.

Paul breathed easier now that it was over. “And I'm still conscious, he said to himself. The he noticed the looks. “I said that out loud, didn't I?”

The man raised his hand again. “If being conscious is a problem, I can fix that for you.”

“I'll pass, if it's the same with you,” Paul replied, and the man lowered his hand.

# Storyboard, 1.5-36

“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 some as powerful as her, between her control of water and ability to hold herself in stasis for centuries. But it wasn’t an issue as 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 levels of 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.”

Wassa, meanwhile, appeared to finally consent to give Grant an answer. “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?” she 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. That 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, Grant stormed out of the tent. 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 and not him.

Donal hurried to join Paul as the golden tiger 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,” Grant 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 near 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 years? 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 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 question.”

“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.”

“I broke my staff, and my life has been filled with impossibilities ever since, so who fucking knows.”

“She believes what she said,” Deton 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’s thinking.”

“What, 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 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 have a sense of magic coursing through them. Yours 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’ll come to my bed, I swear I’m going to do something really nasty to you.”

“Like that would take a lot of work,” Niel 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 he realized what he’d 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 forces?”

“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.”

“Thoams,” Grant warned.

Paul exchanged a look with Niel and Roland, hoping one of them knew 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 worst, 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.”

#####

The look was perfect, as far as Paul could tell. Before them stood Wassa in her pale blue robes. Her arms, crossed over her chest and the scowl as they all looked over her, that 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’s recounting 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.”

Pause. “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 his, 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 hands 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 Grant's removal of the cloak. It was similar to one of those high tech arctic blankets, only in broken pieces like an unfolded disco ball. Grant had mentioned the concepts of the broken mirrors brought things like 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 results they'd seen, but images 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, Niel, and Roland. “Niel, I need you to gather your people 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.

# Storyboard, 1.5-37

Paul froze.

He was halfway to the camp, and something was wrong.

It wasn't with the camp itself. The sounds he heard coming from there were what he'd gotten to associate as normal when the people were battle-ready security experts. It was...

He caught motion among the trees, faint enough he might convince himself he had imagined it if not for the Chamber having surprised them already and the knowledge that Wassa had been giving them information. They might have ensured no one inside the forcefield spoke with anyone outside it, but those outside did know where the mansion was, and the cut communication would signal the location was under some form of attack.

He had his phone in one hand to warn Joseph, his handgun in the other, as the gunshot began. They came from the camp, but also from the woods behind him, where he'd been.

His decision was instantaneous. He was running back the way he'd come. Joseph would lead his people, and everyone else there was an expert. At best, Paul would get in the way there. Grant only had a dozen people with him, one of which was Paul's best friend. With them, one person, even as untrained as Paul was, could make a positive difference.

He reacted before the movement among the trees ahead of him registered, firing three times. The figure fell to the ground, then rolled on their back, raising a machine gun and firing back at Paul.

The golden tiger threw himself to the side, rolled, noticed the closer person in forest camo, stood, and turned to they'd take the next volley of bullets in his stead. Even as he considered reaching for the machine gun strapped to the woman's chest, it registered there were others around him.

He lowered himself as he let go of the body, kicked the legs out of the closest one, stood, punched the next one one hard, and as they flew away round kicked the third. The first was up and coming at him. Paul smirked and raised his hand, only to be horrified he'd somehow dropped his gun.

He blocked and moved around the body on the ground. His counter was dodged, and he winced as the punch connected in his side hard enough he knew he should be in excruciating pain. He caught the next punch in the hand but received one in the muzzle that sent his head snapping to the side and had him tasting blood. He righted his head and glared at the man before him, unusually pleased at the terror the motion caused in his opponent.

Holding them by the hand, he punched them three times in quick succession in the face and the man went limp. With a snarl, he raised his boot to bring it down on the man's neck but gunfire had him dropping and searching for the shooter.

It was further away, he realized, and the only people in that direction were his friends. He put what he had been about to do out of his mind and ran toward the gunfire. Elbowing in the face the woman he'd punched away as he passed.

He was out of his mind, the probably sane part yelled at him, to be running toward the fighting instead of away.

Paul didn't care.

Maybe it was Arnold's anger or Aaron's love of fighting, but Paul was going to make the Chamber pay for showing up now.

#####

The machine gun shattered under the impact as Paul swung it in the man's chest, sending him up and away. As much as shooting them at a distance was effective, there was nothing as satisfying as feeling the impact in his hand and arms-

-less so on his back.

Paul staggered forward from the blow and turned, watching the stunned woman who had tried to incapacitate him with her machine gun's butt. She tried again and he blocked, feeling the blow compounding the multiple bruises he had from blocking so many blows. He punched her and she went down.

The gunshot registered at the same time as the impact and he danced with the momentum to stay standing. The man missed his next shot, but the handgun's muzzle was squarely aimed at Paul's face where he managed to stop.

There was a flash of blue then the gun, and hand, fell to the ground. More ribbons of water flew around and through the man, then he too dropped. Paul looked for who had saved

his life, saw the seal in the shimmering blue robe, and lunged for the gun, rolling and pointing at her as what she'd done caught up to him.

"I'm confused," he said, crouched behind the firearm aimed at her.

"I have saved your life," Wassa replied, "I fail to see what is confusing about that."

Paul glanced around, he had no idea how far he'd made it before coming across this group, but there was still fighting going on in the distance where he'd been heading. "Why?"

The question annoyed her. "I believe the expression is 'I'm on your side'."

"Only you sold us off to the Chamber. Twice."

She motioned, and it took all of Paul's willpower not to fire. To his left and behind, a man screamed in pain, then that became a gurgle. Paul didn't want to see what his imagination was telling him Wassa was doing.

"I did not. I manipulated them into creating the situation that will guarantee we win."

"Grant," Paul said. "The hope thing."

"You are not one of us, therefore I do not expect you to understand. But Grant is the strongest of us, all of us, but only when things look hopeless. Only at our strongest can we hope to win."

"You're right, I don't get it." Paul stood, not lowering his handgun. It wouldn't do any good, he'd already seen that. But the part that had been added to his instincts when he received Alex's gift insisted that all he needed was the right angle and he could take her out.

He lowered the gun. ONLY taking her out wouldn't help anything. "You do get that Grant is going to be pissed if this is some ploy, right?"

Her smile seemed genuine. "Once this is over and the Chamber has been put in their place, I will gladly submit to his anger."

Paul shook his head in disbelief, then turned. "Come on. We'd better make sure they survive so Grant can shut them down." He started running again.

"You must have faith in him."



“I’ll have a lot more faith once we make sure he can survive.”

#####

Where did they all come from? Paul mentally complained as he punched another one. Did the Chamber have some vat in the woods they could pull attackers out of? He elbowed the one at his back and heard ribs break. Glancing around, he saw Wassa fighting a Chamber holding a talisman that caused her water to turn to steam anytime she added that to her attacks. It wasn’t helping the man all that much; even without using water the seal was a menace.

The glance was enough for three Chamber to regroup and come at him as a unit. A gunshot brought one down and surprised the other two as a second shot took another down and Paul punched the third hard enough the muzzle broke.

He turned to face the buffalo and wolf heading in his direction.

“Do you have any idea what Aaron’s going to do to us if you get killed under our watch?” Joseph demanded, cutting off Paul’s thanks.

“Probably not going to give you a raise.”

“You were supposed to come back after the kangaroo’s thing,” the buffalo said, ignoring Paul’s attempt at humor.

“I was, but the Chamber attacked and-”

“You went in the opposite direction of where we were!”

Paul looked at the wolf, who vehemently shook his head. Paul was clearly on his own here. “I went where I was needed. I’d have gotten in the way among all the professionals in the camp.”

“I’d have known where you are!”

“I’m in charge!” Paul yelled back. “I’ll fucking go help who ever I think needs it!”

“I’m here to make sure you stay alive,” the buffalo growled, stepping closer to Paul.

Paul closed the distance. “Then take that big gun in your hands and come shoot something with me.”

The two of them glared at each other.

“Just to be clear,” the wolf said. “You do mean his actual gun, and not his cock, right? Because I think now-” He shut his muzzle as they both turned their glaring on him. He raised his hand in defeat and Paul went back to glaring at the buffalo, but it was too late. The image was firmly planted in his mind.

“Well,” the golden tiger said, “You are pretty big.”

Joseph sighed. “Civilians.”

“Is the courting over?” Wassa said, and immediately was facing two machine guns but didn’t look impressed.

“How did you get out?” Joseph demanded.

“Magic,” she replied with a straight face.

That took the buffalo off guard.

“She saved my life,” Paul said. “For the time being, I trust her.”

“Where’s your firearm?” the wolf asked.

Paul sighed. “Don’t remind me.”

“Don’t remind you of what?”

“That I can’t seem to keep hold of one in the middle of this fighting,” He indicated the remnant of the machine gun. “Or keep them intact.”

The wolf took a step back, holding his machine gun to his chest protectively.

“Civilians,” Joseph grumbled.

The wolf opened his mouth, then closed it, ears plastered to his head in embarrassment.

“How about we go that way,” Paul pointed towards the continued fighting in the distance, “and take out our frustrations on some of the Chamber bad guys?” He looked at the

wolf and buffalo, one still looking shamed and the other angry. “I’ll be happy to vent whatever frustration I have left once this is all done on the both of you.”

That cheered the wolf up.

“I thought you were different from them,” Joseph asked.

“That one, comes from wanting to do it with friends which is something you’ll have both earned between this and Ilopango,” Paul responded as he scanned the ground for a working firearm, not finding any. “And two, not being an obsessive top. Or did you think your ass would be all the stress relief I’d need?”

Before they could respond, Wassa said something that didn’t sound complimentary at all with a throwing of the hands in the air, and sign universal through the ages, and storming in the direction of the fighting.

“What if she’s going there to stab our people in the back?” the wolf asked.

Joseph kept glaring at Paul for a second. “Then we’d better follow her to make sure she doesn’t get to. If that’s okay with you, boss?”

Paul smiled. “I couldn’t have said it better.”

#####

The scene Paul walked onto confused him. Only two of the Steel Link people were down, the rest were fighting against the Chamber, but the Chamber stood between them and Grant, who was passing himself off as Wassa, who was with his back to a small gated entrance to the property. The tiger couldn’t see Thomas or Denton among the fighters or the bodies on the ground.

He knew his best friend wouldn’t just run off and leave Grant in... whatever this situation was, and he couldn’t believe a god’s champion would flee either. So wherever they were, it had to be part of some plan.

Next to him, Wassa was looking at the scene too.

“He’s passing himself off as you so-”

She raised a hand and Paul closed his mouth. “I do not need explanations. But I can not take part in this fight if Grant is to succeed at what he is attempting.”

“Get God Wolf to drop the forcefield so some of our people can get in and stop all this.” He ignored the buffalo’s glares. If Wassa was here to cause them to fail, all she had to do was run in and fight. It didn’t matter what side she took in that battle; the presence of two of her would ensure the forcefield stayed up.

Paul took the handgun out of Joseph’s hip holster. “You have a machine gun,” he said as the buffalo started to protest. “I’m heading in to help our people.” he looked at Wassa. “If you can help without revealing yourself I’m sure everyone would appreciate it.”

She nodded and stepped into the woods away from them.

“You’re an idiot for trusting her,” Joseph said.

“We’ll find out once this is over, won’t we.” He racked the handgun and started walking toward the fighting, again.

Time to see if he could create some good stories for people to tell about the Orrs.

# Storyboard, 1.5-38

Not outright winning proved harder than Paul expected.

He'd explained Grant's plan to get inside the forcefield to Joseph as they ran towards the fighting, and the buffalo had reluctantly admitted it explained the seeming incompetence of the Steel Link men. They hit the fight, pulling their punches; despite Paul's burning desire to cave in the heads of every Chamber person he came across.

The problem, Paul noticed, was just how weak these Chamber seemed to be. They had conventional weapons and were proficient in using them, but except for the occasional talisman, they had no magical heavy hitters. So even with the odds four times in Chamber's favor, not overpowering them took effort.

As time dragged on, Paul wondered if they already lost. God Wolf said half an hour, and the golden tiger thought they'd passed that time frame a while back. Still, he kept fighting, pulling back enough not to send anyone into unconsciousness and back away when the others behaved as if they were overwhelmed. Whoever had been left in charge still believed this could work.

A cry came from the Chamber. Someone pointed to the distant mansion, but it was the people Paul could make out that interested him. God Wolf, with two others.

"Remember what we're here for!" an ocelot in the black and gray body armor of Steel Link yelled, and ran at the Chamber.

Paul wasn't sure what their reasons were beyond maintaining the illusion Grant was Wassa, but he wanted a chance to get on the other side of the forcefield. He wasn't leaving Grant alone if he could help it.

He was two dozen feet from the seal when he could make out neither of the men with God Wolf had an obvious staff. One spoke on a radio, and Paul pushed forward, shoulding and elbowing Chamber aside, effectively cutting himself off from his allies. He ignored the blows and stopped pulling back his.

The other person with God Wolf pointed to the fighting, maybe at Paul himself, and the wolf barked an order to the one with the phone.

Paul stopped hitting them, shoving people aside and pulling any grabbing onto him along. When the seal stepped through the gated entrance, Paul jumped after her, landing on the ground beside her, stepping away from him along with the three Chamber he'd dragged along.

In his periphery, he saw a rat blink into existence, and then vanish.

More people, Chamber, Steel Link, as well as Pierce, had made it through the gate before the forcefield blocked the way again.

"Stand down!" God Wolf ordered, and Paul first fought, then gave in to the order and stopped trying to pull the Chamber off him.

The last one to stop fighting was Pierce, the wolf whining plaintively when he dropped to his knees.

God Wolf stopped before Wassa, looking her up and down, frowning. "You're not as much of a stranger as I expected you to be."

"I shall take it as a compliment," the seal replied, then looked around at the forcefield and the Chamber trying to push through. She stepped aside as God Wolf reached for her, or rather Paul realized, for Excalibur.

"You said it's mind," God Wolf growled.

"Of course, my apologies. It simply that I have been attacked from so many sides today." She gave him a smile Paul thought was devoid of warmth, but God Wolf only had eyes for the scabbard sword she held. "I will be honored to give you what you so rightly deserve." She stepped forward, but instead of presenting the sword to him, she swung it up and between his legs.

Paul winced in sympathy at the impact, but pushed through the weak compulsion and struck the closest of the Chamber as God Wolf dropped to his knees, one hand to his crotch, the other reaching for Wassa, but only grabbing her robe, which shimmered back into the blanket of mirror pieces as it ripped off Grant's shoulders.

God Wolf's confusion turned to anger. Then the kangaroo had a boot to his head, sending the wolf down for the count.

Paul lunged for the man with the radio, tackling him down, then taking it out of his hand and crushing it. When he stood with Grant, two Steel Link people, and Pierce, were the

only ones standing.

On the other side of the forcefield, Steel Link was subduing the last of the Chamber.

Grant only spared them a look before heading towards the mansion. Paul hurried to fall into step with him, the three others right behind him.

“You should get back with the others,” Grant said.

“The plan had a bunch of men getting in with you. I’m not letting you do this alone.”

“If anyone sees me walk away from this,” the wolf said, “It’s my ass that’s going to pay.”

“So you’re going to do it when no one’s looking?” the Steel Link jaguar asked.

“Now isn’t the time,” Paul said. “I saw Thomas on this side, but he didn’t seem to have anyone with him.”

Grant kept glaring at Paul, but didn’t comment on him not leaving. “Him and Denton had to use the men they were planning on bridging in to make my role believable when the Chamber showed up out of nowhere and converged on me.”

“How long is God Wolf going to be down for?”

“Nowhere near long enough,” Grant growled.

“Whatever happened in Monaco must have left a mark,” Paul said, and was glared at again.

When they were halfway to the mansion, a form on the path resolved into that of a man, and Grant growled. He was two-thirds of the way, and alone, which made Paul suspicious. The tiger reached for his gun, only to find his holster empty.

The wolf noticed the gesture. “Jo’s going to be pissed you lost his firearm.”

No less pissed than Paul was. The next one, he was taping to his hand.

“I told them you’d find a way to get in,” Kingsley said. The vole held ins staff, made of magnets, before him with both hands, and had a satisfied smirk on his muzzle.

Grant unsheathed Excalibur. "You're taking on more than you can handle this time, Kingsley. So walk away."

"Really? When have you ever known me to underestimate you, Grant?"

"You think you can take me on?" the kangaroo replied, surprised. "With your staff, when I have Excalibur?"

The vole shook his head. "I'm also not an idiot. It's why you only think I'm standing in your way alone." The air on the left and right of the Vole shimmered and people became visible. The shimmering continued to expand and more people appeared. By the time it ended, at least a hundred people stood in a semicircle between them and the house. A quarter of which held staves.

"Now," Kingsley said. "How about you reconsider your position, hand me Excalibur, and come along quietly? I'd rather have you alive to see what we're about to accomplish than dead."

Grant looked around, then at Paul. "I told you to stay back."

"And I told you I was sticking around."

The wolf grinned at the Steel Link men. "You two can feel free to run off with your tail between your legs. We've got this." He pulled a long knife from his back.

"If you're not scared of this," the jaguar said, "just imagine how unimpressed we are with them." He raised his gun. His companion didn't look as confident, but he checked the magazine on his machine gun and nodded.

"Idiots," Grant whispered, then fixed his gaze on the vole.

"You really are suicidal, aren't you Grant?"

"What I am," the kangaroo replied, "Is utterly fed up with you and what you've done, let alone are planning on doing. I'd rather die, trying to stop you, than watch it happen."

The vole shrugged. "If that's how you want to go, we'll be happy to make it happen." With a quick motion of his staff, the Steel Link beaver was jerked forward by the machine gun until the strap broke.

"Links and their big guns," the wolf chuckled.



Kingsley didn't look at the beaver who hurried to his feet; instead, he was glaring at Grant, who hadn't seemed to feel even a tug on Excalibur.

"Do you want to reconsider, Kingsley?"

"Just kill the lot of them," the vole replied

Paul rushed those on his right, jumping aside when one pointed a thin wand in his direction. The edge of the shock wave that caught him came with the sounds of hundreds of people talking and music playing. He was up and had punched her before she could try again.

A gunshot coincided with the man closest to Paul staggering back, a bloody hole in the left side of his chest, then falling.

He kicked the wand behind him and struck the woman who tried to get around him.

"Down," came Pierce's voice, and Paul ducked, felt the weight on his shoulders as the wolf used him to launch himself up. He landed in the middle of the Chamber, knife in one hand, and whipping something thin in the other. The wand, Paul realized, as he threw himself into the fight. The wand did nothing magical in the wolf's hands, but it still left cuts on anyone who was slashed with it.

Paul punched, kicked, and kneaded anyone within reach. He broke skulls and arms and legs, but there were too many of them. He shouldered one aside, caught his breath, and had to deal with six more. His body armor took most of the impacts, but he still felt too many of them.

He shoved them way, panting, and they didn't move as far as he'd like. And they were already-

He was on the other side of the battlefield before the arms around him registered.

"It's in the basement," Thomas said. "It's fucking impressive, whatever it is. Denton brought the forcefield down, but the Chamber has more of their people between ours and the mansion, so don't expect help. Tell Grant."

Then his best friend was gone, and Paul realized he'd left him a gift. The revolver was old, and only had six shots, but it was a gun and with that in his hand, Paul could handle anything.

He turned and found himself looking at someone pointing the massive end of a fire hose in his direction. The opening glowed as Paul leveled his gun. Then there was someone in a pale blue robe fore him as the fire hit the water, turning to steam, which rushed towards the seal, pushing her into him.

As they fell back, Paul lined the shoe and fired. The staff holder's head exploded.

As quickly and as gently as he could, he moved out from under her. A glance around told him everyone else was busy.

"Why?" He asked Wassa. She was badly hurt. Her entire front was burned beyond third degree, the ash cracking as she struggled to breathe.

"You were the one I could reach," she wheezed.

"I'll get you someone." Paul tried to stand, but she pulled him down.

"I do not matter, Paul." Her voice was weak. "Grant is the one. You must convince him of his power."

"He already knows how to use Excalibur."

"His power," she insisted. "The power in him."

"But Practitioners need a staff."

"Not him. Remind him he is the brieist at the bleakest. It is him, not-"

She was still, no longer breathing.

Paul gently removed her hand from his arm and ran into the fray. What she'd said didn't make a lot of sense, but this was magic. When did it ever? One thing was sure, if this wasn't the bleakest moment, Paul wasn't sure what would be.

He grabbed the jaguar in passing. "I need you to keep them off me and Grant."

"Are you fucking insane?"

"I'm here. What does that tell you?"

The response was interrupted by Paul's gun, taking down a woman with what Paul

thought was a wiper in her hand. A staff? What fucking concept did a wiper represent?

Grant was keeping an aread around him clear by expertly wielding Excalibur to block blasts of magic and cut down anyone who got too close. Paul fired at the biggest person; then, reluctantly, handed the gun to the jaguar.

“We need time,” he ordered, then rat that the kangaroo, who nearly cut him down.

“Are you fucking insane?” Grant demanded.

“We need a storm!”

“We need a fucking miricle,” Grant replied, swiping a bolt of lightning in two, shattering it completely. Paul stayed at his back.

“You’re the miracle, Grant. Wassa said this is when you’re the strongest.”

“Wassa’s fucking more insane than you are! I haven't had my staff for years!”

“And neither did Wassa!”

Paul nearly staggered as the realization hit. Before he could tell Grant, a roar resounded bringing the fighting to a stop as everyone turned to stare at God Wolf running towards them.

“Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me,” Grant muttered.

Paul grabbed the kangaroo by the shoulder. “You’re like them. They keep saying it.”

“I am nothing-”

“Shut up and listen. Where are their staves? How did Wassa control water? How does Got Wolf order people around? Where are their staves?”

Grant tried to speak as confusion filled his eyes. “I’m not,” he finally managed, then looked around them at the carnage and finally up at the clear blue sky.

God Wolf was fifty feet away and there was no doubt who he was running for now.

“Fuck, I hope you’re right,” Grant whispered. “Hold on to me.”

Paul did as he was told, and before he was done tightening his grip, the light vanished behind clouds so thick he couldn't see anything.

In the darkness, the silence felt heavy, waiting, stalking.

Then it broke into a blinding shattering of his eardrums.

# Storyboard, 1.5-39

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 more, as the whine lowered 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 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. Meaning that ceremony would either be hurried along, or they'd be sending more people to stop them. Or why not both?

"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 to me for answers, because I'm new at being magical. All I got is observation and adrenaline fueled guesses." 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 that this is basically hopeless?”

“Bleakest,” Paul said, and earned himself a trio of 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 towards 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, at least two stories high underground. The light came from torches hanging at regular intervals on the wall, but Paul couldn’t detect any smell of smoke

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

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

“Guys,” Neil called. “Look at this, that’s Inca designs. This is a Roman gladius. Over there is an Egyptian oar.” The raccoon kept 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 wood that looks to be taken from a pagoda model. That right there is definitely Babylonian. How long have they been working on this?”

“A long time,” Grant said breathlessly. 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 staves to have been made. That’s Alexander the Great’s chest plate, and 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’s 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 being blinded by awe. The lack of guards 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 contains the concepts of the divine right of kings and ideals of chivalry in their purest most idyllic form; particularly since in the reforging it is now drawing on centuries of Authorian fiction it itself inspired. Striking down this,” he motioned around them, “an arrogant theater built to destroy the gods at the risk of cracking the planet... it’s more than an applicable tool.”

“So why not simply slash through everything?” Niel 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. Brining 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 with strained hope.

“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 that caught Grant’s attention, this one with intricate carvings that Paul couldn’t stop from wanting to be a language.

“There is 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 a 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.

“Gods need followers,” Niel said. “If people stop believing in the power they represent, they may as well not exist. If that means death or eternal starvation... no one knows, but to us it’s academic.”

“So, the Chamber made a staff with pieces of old gods,” Paul said. “So what? Grant’s

entire thing for the past few years has been breaking staves like their match sticks.”

“But that’s exactly it,” the kangaroo said as he let Excalibur slip from his hands and clatter 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 to Paul’s ears. And somehow, there was pride in his voice. “But I should have known better, shouldn’t I, Son?”

# Storyboard, 1.5-40

“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 I was 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 even 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.”

“Neil?” Thomas asked.

“That’s a nuclear bomb,” the raccoon replied.

“Aren’t those things in teardrop-shaped containers with fins on top and the radiation symbol 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 thoughts.

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 has 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, and was surprised that the staff looked like what he'd seen staves look like in movies instead of some strange arrangement of items that could be, at times, confused for worthless junk.

The tiger 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 arts 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-

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, administrating 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 hand. The embroidery on the man’s shirt shimmered and he smirked.

Then Paul had to deal with the 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 reflexes let him avoid most blows, which passed him by 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 towards him, and the man readied himself.

Paul didn’t bother dodging, settling on deflecting the attacks 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 struck the wall between a lantern and a stone table with what could be hieroglyphs carved on it.

“How about we avoid breaking anything!” Grant yelled. “There’s no telling if anything else might set the whole 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 now no matter what it cost him.

The staff hit him in the side, and Paul had his arm closed over it before it sent 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, grabbing the staggering man by the shirt, looked over the room, and- "Niel, Duck!" He threw the man at the raccoon's opponent as he lifted some device over his head Paul had neither time or 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 present 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 the koala, a ball of plasma forming his his hand.

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

Paul let out a breath that caught. "Guy! 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 beautifly just as it is." The other armadillo replied.

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

“Not as drained as I am. This last jump 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 wipe them from existence so the Chamber wouldn’t ever have...” the kangaroo trailed off, looking around the room as his face twitched between different looks of concentration.

“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 his 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 operations, after all.

“Good, good,” Grant said, back to studying the room. “I’ll take everything you can find for me.”



Paul stepped to Thomas while one armadillo dragged the other way. “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.

# Storyboard, 1.5-41

# Storyboard, 1.5-42