

Storyboard-35

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 toward 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 heat 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 toward it. It might have increased in size, it maybe it was simply generating more light. Paul had trouble telling what it was doing, and Thermo-nuclear physic had never been his fields, so when Gilbert and Laurence had 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, and that the explanation had enraged the three representative of England's Green Men.

Paul saw the effect the forcefield had on the magnetized plasma as the light seemed to stop where the low wall stood.

Gilbert and Laurence moved again 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, hinting at the arc of the dome 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 face was visible. When he looked at the ball again, the light was stronger 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 binocular, 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 that Paul had to look away.

Then the explosion had his ears plastered to his skull and the vehicles behind them lose their color before end looking at them instead of ahead, he had to close his eyes at the light's intensity.

The shockwave hit like a wall of brick that had trees bending, some breaking, what sounded like a vehicle sliding, and Paul fighting to stay on his feet for a second, then not to fall forward as it ended as suddenly as it hit.

Paul blinked the spots out of his eyes, then was looked through the binoculars. He located the Armadillos, being helped away, their location at the time of the detonation

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 their powers, but since the goal was to destroy one, there had been questions as to how effective they would be, even at a distance.

There the Chamber's forcefield was, still was, was marked by the fieldstone wall, melted on the outside with the line where the field crossed it cleanly defined, as well as the ash drifting down and landing on it.

On this side of the field, expect for where the armadillo had been protected, the ground was burned to the soil, the trees that were still standing were black and thin, most of their wood vaporised in the seconds the blast lasted. On the other side, the grass was vibrant green, the trees'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 country side? Nothing?"

The woman was a bear with brown fur streaked with green what 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. The mark of their status as representatives of the Green Man, 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 had 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, since we can't outright invade. Walter, how are we set up to lay siege to them until we 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 of 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 collider 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 the power,” Grant said. “It’s about what the collider 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,” Grand 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 toward this for as long as the trees here have been standing, if not longer. I they are not ready this very moment, they will be soon.”

“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 preparation, but even if we get that 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 professional they are. You can do us the courtesy of doing the same.” Paul turned and walked away.

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Paul returned to the command tent from the walk 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 would enjoy themselves.

The mood inside the 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 live by.

He hadn't doubted Denton was their god's champion, but listening to him now, he was getting a sense of 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 mile 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.

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Paul stood by as Grant pressed Excalibur's tip against the force field 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 not 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 awe struck on me now. It's too nice having someone around how 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.

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"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 on old phrase, you ain't the boss of me."

The raccons glared at one another.

Between them, sitting on a stool, head in his hand, Roland looked like he'd been listening to too much of this.

Paul took him then Neil and pulled them away, ignoring Niel's protest. 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.

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Paul stepped out of the sex tent and stretched. Neil 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 Niel 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. 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 that same 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 do rough it that much just because he, along with the others, had forgotten to take her lack of modern knowledge into account.

He caught glimpse 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 robe, thankfully, he called to her.

The seal turned and glare at him, and allowed him to see the wolf her form had hidden. He was smaller than in person, but Niel had described God Wolf in enough detail for Paul to recognize the projection.

"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 the hand that sent a spear of water in his direction. Paul stepped around it and drew the gun, firing three times at the seal before the 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 over reaction, but he needed to stop her before she revealed more of their plan to the enemy. He saw the surprise on her face when the water moved away, and Paul felt confident about

taking her quickly from close quarter.

Only she managed to deflect the few blows that connected, as if her body could move his fist 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 anyone had a right to, and despite his enhanced 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 the trees machine guns aimed at her.

Wassa looked at them, and didn't seemed detered.

“Don't,” Paul said. “You can't take them on. They're going to kill you.”

“That isn't going to be necessary,” one of the man 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, then 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.