

Storyboard-42

Paul woke up on a cot.

That was his first surprise. The second was that the tent was standing. The way he'd been hit, he expected to wake up to everything miles from the mansion being ripped out.

"Welcome back," a woman with green fur said.

He sat up. "Thomas?"

"The teleporter is being seen by people from his faction. We decided that those not able to participate shouldn't be in the way of those having sex."

"We?"

"Nature is our strength," she said, "and we are in the middle of a forest. We woke from the explosion first. Others from your faction have already woken."

"So much for Arnold's gift," Paul muttered, then shook his head at her inquisitive look. "What's the damage like?"

"Surprisingly contained, all things considered."

Oh, that didn't bode well.

He stood, waited for vertigo to pass, then headed outside. The camp looked normal enough. The trees were still standing. He grabbed a pair of binoculars and looked at the mansion, or rather where it had been. There was little of it left, part of a wall here, a beam there. Grant had used 'shouldn't' and not 'won't'.

He made out bodies on the property, and as he wrestled with the sadness that Grant's act hadn't been as free of death as the kangaroo had hoped, he noticed one stir, then another. They were still alive, even that close to the explosion? Had they had protection?

He dropped the binoculars. Oh fuck, the Chamber was still alive. "I need people!" He yelled to those moving about. "We need to secure the Chamber before they come up with something to make our lives miserable again."

He quickly had people running with him.

The Chamber proved easy to secure. Even the most vehement in their protest only had their fists and words to use as objections, and they were ineffective against trained people. Paul didn't see any staves, but talismans lay on the ground, not so much shattered, as simply fallen apart, as if whatever had held them together had been removed. Leaving the individual components.

The one person Paul hadn't expected to come across was one of the casualties. God Wolf rested on the ground, lifeless. There was something peaceful about how he'd fallen over. No, he looked like he'd laid down before the explosion. As if he'd had a warning of what was coming and had been at peace with it.

He was rationalizing.

This was magic, so God Wolf might have known what was about to happen, but be at peace with being ended? Paul couldn't imagine that. He'd been too full of himself and his

power the few times Paul had seen him for the tiger to believe he was able to accept any kind of ending.

The fact the body was there raised a conundrum for Paul.

He looked toward the mansion's remains. If God Wolf hadn't been destroyed by Grant redirecting the magic to end the staves, Paul had to find out if Grant's body had survived, and if it had, he should be given the proper rites. Whatever those were for Practitioners.

Donal might know what they are.

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"I have the stairs!" someone yelled, then there was a hand on Paul's shoulder and he was by the entrance to the basement.

"I don't think you—"

The rest was left behind as Paul was at the base of the stairs.

"If he thinks I'm letting anyone else get to him," Thomas grumbled.

Paul shone his light around. "I think he's more worried about our safety. The outside is gone, so it's reasonable to think the basement isn't safe, although it looks mostly untouched."

"Come on." Instead of teleporting, Thomas walked to the archway leading to the Chamber's chamber. "Okay," Thomas said, "I wasn't expecting that."

Neither had Paul.

Grant's talisman was intact, as were the staves attached to the walls.

"Don't," Paul told Thomas, as the rat touched one of them.

Nothing happened.

"It worked."

They found Excalibur and Joan of Arc's swords on the pyre, the only two shattered staves.

Paul looked around. "He was standing here, right?"

"When we left." Thomas walked around the pyre. "He probably moved around while he waited."

"But he had to touch this, or at least the swords to break them, right?"

Thomas nodded. "I have no idea why his body's not here."

"Maybe his sacrifice means he..." Paul didn't want to finish the thought.

"Who knows. Maybe the universe took him away." Thomas looked around. "I guess he doesn't need last rites then."

Paul placed an arm around Thomas's shoulders. "We can still do something."

"I'm going to miss that asshole," Thomas said softly.

A yell behind him, then a thud, followed by a pained groan had them turn.

"Really?" the kangaroo yelled at the ceiling. "You fucking reveal yourself to me, and just drop me back down." He groaned. "You can do anything you fucking want but you couldn't just deposit me on the ground gently." He rolled and pushed himself to his feet. "Fuck, I liked it better when I thought it was the universe behind my magic." He raised his

head. "The universe doesn't owe me a fucking soft landing!"

Thomas was before Grant, hugging him. The motion snapped Paul out of his stunned state and he headed for them.

The kangaroo hugged Thomas back. "Turns out I follow a god after all. He's an ingrate and an asshole. But I'll get to meet your son. So he gets a pass this time."

"I'm glad you're back too," Paul said, offering the kangaroo his hand. "But how?"

"Gods," Grant said with a roll of the eyes. "Well, one. Filled with so much power from all the staved magic returning to him he got it in his head he could do pretty much anything."

"And he settled on sending you back?" Paul shook himself. "Sorry, I definitely don't mean that like it came out."

Grant laughed. "Oh trust me, the asshole didn't just send me back for the fun of it."

"Shouldn't you be more respectful of a god?" Thomas asked.

"If respect is what he wanted, he definitely shouldn't have made me his champion."

Grant patted Thomas's back. "Come on, we need to head to camp, the asshole in charge has given me one actual taste to accomplish in his name. I'm going to do that, and then take time for myself." He smiled at Paul. "Be normal for a while."

"Do Champion get to do that?" Paul asked as Thomas took his hand.

"Oh, he fucking better let me."

Then they weren't in the mansion anymore.

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There were nearly two hundred Chamber, well, people, assembled under guards. The Chamber didn't exist anymore. Neither did the practitioners. Grant had confirmed that. There were no staves left. Would never be again.

Grant had insisted Paul be there. A clear snub at all the men in charge who had demanded Grant make time for them once they'd found out the faction has an official representative. Thomas had told him Grant had never been a fan of authority, and meeting a god seemed to have ratcheted that somewhat.

"Alright," Grant said to the men and women. "I'm hoping you've all noticed things have changed because I am in no mood to go over the detail with any of you. This little war is over. Not only that but there is no more Chamber." He raised his voice over the protests. "Or Practitioners!" the surprised quieted most of them.

"There never was," he continued. "We just got too obsessed with the staves and what they meant, and we got that wrong too, but that's not entirely on us. If a certain someone had just stepped in and explained things, instead of letting us believe we were powered by the universe, a lot of this could have been avoided."

"What are you insinuating?" a woman asked.

"I'm telling you that we always had a god. He's just criminally hands-off. We are his children. We are the Children of Merlin."

Snickers. "You expect me to believe that Merlin, from King Arthur and stuff was a god?"

"That Merlin was added to the story," Grant said, "to the fable. It's just a name. There

are a lot of men named Merlin today, I'm not going to claim any of them are our god. And he has been told in no uncertain terms that what you almost down, twice, isn't acceptable. Hence the ... downgrading."

"If he was a god," someone yelled, "like you claim. He'd have stood up to anyone trying to tell him what to do."

"I really didn't want to have to go into details here," Grant muttered.

"Get used to it," Denton said. "They never listen to us."

"Okay, here is what happened. Merlin let you bunch nearly kill every other god. They aren't happy. Their deal was basically this. Keep us in line, or they are wiping each and every one of us out. And if you think that's an empty threat, I'll point you to the people around us, barely a fraction of the factions out there, one of which shattered the organization that had tried to dictate how we were all going to live. Now imagine what will happen to us, if the god gives every one of their followers the dictate to exterminate us."

"They wouldn't dare!" someone yelled.

And another "They don't have the right!"

Grant looked at Denton in disbelief and the cheetah shrugged.

"They are gods!" Grant yelled. "Who's going to stop them, you? I'm here to make sure you know what's expected of us so we—"

"Who put you in charge!"

"You're kidding?" Grant asked. "Our god put me in charge."

"You expect me to believe a god would put someone like you in charge of anything?" the vole pushed the people out of his way.

"Kingsley," Grant greeted him. "Believe it or not, I'm glad you're alive."

The vole snorted. "Right, because that tornado was meant to keep me alive."

Grant smiled. "You more than a lot of people know precision's never been my strength. Here's the deal. No more staves. No more direct line into him. We're like the other factions now. Talismans are how we'll do magic from now on. The only way."

Kingsley spat at Grant's feet. "Fuck you."

"It's a choice, Kingsley. That is how our god dictates we work from this point forward. We abused what we had before."

"You think I'm going to have anything to do with you or anything that thinks you deserve anything more than to be one of those who gets us the power we deserve?"

"That sounds a lot like you don't want to be a Child of Merlin."

"I," Kingsley snapped, "am Chamber! I will take what is rightfully mine!"

Grant smiled as cheers and chants of Kingsley's name rose. "Thank you for giving me the satisfaction." He had a hand on the vole's forehead. "Remember that you were given the choice to stay."

The defiance left the vole's face, replaced by fear, then horror. He staggered back when Grant let go.

"What did you do?" Kingsley demanded. "It's gone!"

"Did you think Merlin would let you keep your magic if you refused to follow him?" he looked at the crowd. "That is the choice you are making today. Any of you who refuse to

live by the rules of the Children of Merlin can leave. Our god will not force his will on you, but he doesn't give freebies either. You want magic, you want his magic. Then you live by his rules, just like the other factions live by the rules of their gods."

"You can't just let them go!" someone behind Grant yelled. "They have crimes to pay for."

"Those who leave the children," Grant said, "are yours to do as you will with. The rest." He paused and Paul couldn't tell if he was letting the tension raise, or he had to steel himself to say it. "Are mine and my god's to see to. Touch them at your peril."

"You are not making friends," Denton whispered.

"Do we ever?" Grant asked.

The shrug the cheetah gave him was filled with promises, good and bad.

"Well, might as well make this worse then." He turned to face the men of the society. "These people haven't don't anything against you. There is no crime you can prove they did."

"They tried to commit murder!" a beagle yelled. "They would have killed my god."

"You willing to go to court over it?" Grant asked. "You have proof the tried? As far as I know, at least in the US, we still need proof before well condemn someone. And it's got to go before courts."

Denton sighed. "And my day was going so well. I can take charge of them, make sure the FBI deals with them fairly."

"You would hand people like us over to the government?" a rabbit asked, horrified.

"The FBI, who, I'll remind you, has a task force to deal with us. You keep bitching to me they keep interfering in what you want to do, so how bout you get them to do their job and deal with these criminals? Or do you think you should take the law into your own hands?" the question was said casual, but the reaction it caused in the men there made it loaded with a threat Paul didn't get.

"You're right," Denton whispered. "Making friends just isn't our thing."

"Well, you guys make your decisions and Denton can deal with them." He pulled a fold-out chair and turned to face the prisoners. "And I will deal with my people."

He sat and let out the kind of sign people watching their free time vanish before them might let out.