

Storyboard-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 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 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 buzz and the pod shipped app told him the request had been received and a drone would be picking it up within the hours. Then listed the extra services they offered, for only a few more bucks.

"They aren't— yeah, never mind. 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 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 that 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 nutrient composition in the creating 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 quiet 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 waltz, or foxtrot my way. 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 handed the physical

emergency key he'd been issued with he'd leased the apartment to the guard, signed the release form, and got in his car to head to Trevor and Judith's for a well-earned meal.

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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 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 should 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 site you accessed and the article you read. I had the owners of those houses up before you were through the first line, and only Madoc Lewiston has any connection to you. So I checked his phone's location. He's at the Orr's club."

"Gym," Paul corrected. "Why are you calling me, Shila?"

She sighed.

Paul waited.

"I need a ride."

"There are a dozen apps for those. I mean, don't you have a deal with Thomas?"

"Have you looked at where the fires are?"

"Only one."

“Well, along with the three server processing farms that were behind most of my computers, the Chamber torched every arrival point Thomas has in the city. You *do* know how his power works, right?”

“Of course I do. You said the Chamber? Aren’t they after Grant and Thomas? What are they doing here?”

“I’ll tell you everything once you’ve picked me up.”

Paul considered it. He didn’t know her, but her and Thomas had an arrangement, and when Thomas mentioned her, other than her being abrasive, he never had anything bad to say.

“Okay, send me the address, but I hope you aren’t in a hurry. The whole city’s in gridlock.” A dot appeared on the map.

“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 protest, 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.

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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.

“You had the time to dress before I got here,” he said. “I could have waited.”

“Do I look like I’m the kind of person who goes out?” she snapped back. “Drive.”

“Where to?” He pulled off the curb.

“Out of the city.”

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

“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. I remember that when I was going out of my mind thinking the Chamber was about to burst through my door.” She did something on her phone and a route appeared on the windshield.

“I need to tell Trevor I’m going to be late.”

“Already did. I had you leave him a message saying you’re helping a friend.”

That was a bit of a stretch, but Paul let it go to focus on the road and he was quickly happy he did.

“Out of curiosity,” he asked, looking in the rearview mirror again. “Is there any chance you were safer in your building than in my car?” yeah, those two cars kept switching places; trying to appear like they weren’t following him.

“Sure, I had plenty of talismans set up, but that’s only good until they overpower them. With those servers down, I can’t push them much. Then my apartment becomes a death trap. At least out here, we can go faster.”

“Which is what I might have to do. We’re being followed.”

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 drive around the slower-moving car. “Unless you have a way to make sure there are no cars on any of that route, they are what’s going to limit my speed.” He accelerated once he cleared the car. 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 afterward.

“It’s good coffee,” he said. “I’m not having it spill.” The two cars were further back, having taken the turn at a safer speed and probably hadn’t had to worry about neatly losing their coffee. It gave him the confidence to look at the map and saw 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 driver’s 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 had said, the bridge in this direction was pretty much deserted, except for those three cars driving toward them.

“Shila,” Paul said. “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. “Then 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 place a hand on it to hold it in place.