

Storyboard-33

“How am I not exhausted?” Paul asked as he dressed. “I’m 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 serves 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 know 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 hall, 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’d 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 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 cousin, yes,” Paul said cautiously.

“No, it just doesn’t make any sense. Our magic, and that includes our ability, 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 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 started, 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're 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 said. "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 came 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 though, it wasn't where the big event is going to be. The place was empty when we broke 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 redying 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 Collider."

"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 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 experimented with you.”

Before Paul could answer him, Trevor had walked away.

Taking a deep breath, he called Royal Security.

“Mister Heeran,” Ernest greeted him, “Allow me to transfer you.”

Paul’s heart sank, he’d 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?” someone 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 gets 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 bet 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. “Knowing 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 has 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 listen 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 heal know he was back.

Paul followed the loudest of the voices into what could have been the lunchroom, by the counter, stoves, and fridges along one wall, but was now some command center. Over the heads, in the center, Paul saw projected screens, to the side physical screens were set up and he heard Grant yell 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 crown 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 was that 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 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 set 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 acknowledgment 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 seen Shila program, or hack. The one truly magical thing he'd witnessed her do have 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 other mostly texts.

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 would fuck whom to prove they weren't the one doing it, I'm feeling very good."

Denton's nod froze partway, then he stared at Paul. "What?"

The golden tiger grinned. "I now know that my aura kicks in when I don't have sex, and they want to find out if that is 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 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 frowned. "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 in lending 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 doing 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 thing against the Chamber."

"Call Irvine," Grant called before Denton replied.

“Neil 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.”