

# Storyboard-1

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(to put this out from the start. I've never been to a graduation (I didn't graduate anything) so I'm going to be making this up base on the little I remember from movies and TV, please fix it.)

“And, having supported his theorem before a board of his former teachers and 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, and 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 applauses. “And good luck with your future.”

He smiles 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, (Are they still called students the doctorate level?), she made sure to remain appraised of how each was doing.

Then, because dancing was one of the things he was known 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 want for it to be over to run off the stage, avoiding a few collisions because of his nimble feet and remaining on them when Gerald Naumer purposely 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 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 grinning 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, putting a hand to her mouth and stepping back.

“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 to 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, ignoring that she was paying attention to Madoc. Paul narrowed 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 like the stories of the rest of his family said, and 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. Dietrich 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.” Dietrich 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 decided 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 account, they weren’t nice people, even if they did a lot for the city. But Dietrich 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 Niel, 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 visits 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, Thomas, along with Olavo, Grant, and others had been hunting for magical staves, to ensure they couldn't fall in the hands of the Chamber, Grant's enemies who, from what Thomas had told Paul, had become more active he hunting them down too.

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 problem, and since being dumped teleporting feet first into that 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 on his own, and then, once Thomas had unloaded, he listened to Paul and whatever problem 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 playing faded, and a new one started, Pauls only requirement for it had been instrumental and with the beat of a waltz. It wasn't his preferred dance. Paul enjoyed those with more energy in them, 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 and he guided her to the dance floor, where there glided together the way they did since the days she taught him the first steps of a waltz.