

Chapter 32

Paul saw the otter waiting for him at the entrance to the bus terminal and understood how Ernest had been able to so casually say getting Paul an escort that would be safe from his influence would be easy.

Paul had forgotten a detail about Steel Link. How he'd forgotten considering he'd been in the building among all those who worked there, he decided to attribute to how busy everything had been and his state of mind the second time.

Unlike Royal Security, Steel Link was a security company first and Society second. Women worked there. He'd even seen them.

And there was no missing this one worked form them. The steel gray ensemble the petite otter wore had more in common with tactical body armor than the business suit it tried passing itself off as.

"Mister Heeran," she greeted him with a smile. "I'm Jazz. I've been asked to accompany you and make sure nothing...unexpected happens." The slight Spanish accent gave her words a lyrical lilt. "I've been authorized to go as far as knocking you out if you start looking at a guy in appreciation."

Paul stopped his hand halfway to offering to shake hers. "Really?"

She grinned. "Nah. Just thought I'd see how you took it."

He hesitated, unsure he believed her. Then decided there wasn't much he could do if she did anything to him. All the gifts he had been given couldn't match someone with the training a place like Steel Link had to demand.

He offered her his hand. "Please call me Paul, seeing as we'll be traveling together for a few days."

"You have your pass?" she asked once she let go of his hand. "We could get a car, you know. It would save us at least a day with you driving half the time."

"Do you know who Adam Orr is?" Paul brought the electronic pass on his screen.

"He's the driver," She said, taking out her phone. "We have a few guys with his gift."

Paul was surprised she knew that much. "He made it clear that if I even thought about getting behind the wheel, my ass would never forgive me."

"Then I'll do all the driving."

"Won't it take just as long, then?" he headed inside. "Since we'll have to stop each night? You might as well relax, too."

He stopped by the small coffee shop for a coffee on the way to the Minneapolis bus, with Jazz muttering in Spanish as she followed him.

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"What the fuck are you doing?" Adam screamed as soon as Paul accepted the call. "Why do those things even still exist?"

"I'm going home."

"You are going to fucking stop that thing and get off. I'm going to have a car pick you up and—"

“No. If I wanted to drive, Jazz would have driven me. I’m—”

“Who the fuck is that?”

“She... you know what? Have a good day, Adam.” Paul disconnected the call. His phone buzzed again before it was close to its holster. He confirmed it was Adam’s number and sheathed his phone.

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He checked his phone. Adam again. And back it went into its holster. Jazz tilted an ear.

“He’s going to get the message at some point.” His message center had to have a limit to how many messages could be left.

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A look at the phone showed him a number he didn’t recognize, and he accepted it before thinking better of it.

“Listen here—”

Paul ended the call with a sigh and watched Jazz pace the parking lot while eating and went back to enjoying his burger and coffee while waiting for the driver to let them know the bus was getting back on the road.

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“How about we get a car?” Paul asked as the driver motioned for them to return to the bus. Jazz had spent the fifteen minute stop walking the parking lot again.

She glared at him, said something that sounded derisive in Spanish, and got on the bus.

Paul ignored his buzzing phone as he got on after her.

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“Thank all the gods,” Jazz said as she stepped off the bus, then was speaking Spanish looking at the sky. Paul firmly did not chuckle at the imploring tone. Again, ignoring his buzzing phone. Adam had not gotten the message. Every few hours he’d call half a dozen times in a room. After the second number Paul had been too tired not to answer, he’d stopped checking. He could have turned his phone off, but Thomas has his own tone, and he might need to talk so...

He stretched, happy to be off the bus too, and looked around for a ride. He took a step toward the Share Rides as his phone buzzed yet again, and he noticed the board with the Minneapolis bus routes.

Adam would just love this.

“We could be driven there,” Jazz pointed out as Paul headed to the outside stop.

“They aren’t worth the money,” he replied, meaning it, even if it wasn’t the main reason. “And there a bus that stops by my mother’s house. Don’t worry, I doubt the bus is going to be busy and you can walk the length.”

Her reply was in Spanish, but the tone, and the glare, made it clear she wasn’t complimenting him.

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Paul stood before the door, trying to decide if he should knock and wait for him other to answer, or unlock it and step inside.

He knew he’d always be welcomed into his mother’s house, but it had been years

since he'd showed up unexpectedly. After moving to San Francisco Bay for his studies, every visit needed to be planned around his course load and her work. And she picked him up at the airport.

This made him feel like a stranger, and—

The door opened, and his mother wrapped her arms around him. "Paul, you're home! I was so worried. Why didn't you call to say you were coming? I'd have picked you up."

"I didn't want you to worry." He hugged her back. And there had been his concern Adam would somehow get onto that call and start screaming at him with his mother hearing it. Phones were supposed to be secured against open line hacking, but his cousins were... well, they weren't the types to let something like what was supposed to be stop them.

"Paul Heeran," she said in her stern, motherly voice as she held his shoulders. "I am your mother. I always worry."

He couldn't keep his lips from quirking up. "And I didn't want to add to the usual motherly kind."

He studied him, then looked to his side. "Oh, I'm sorry, hello."

"Mom, this is Jazz, she's..." he trailed off, searching for how to explain in a way that wouldn't cause his mother to worry.

"Jazmyn Heleign Conjuangco Corpuz," the otter said, offering her hand. "Your son's an important person, and my boss didn't want him to roam around without some form of protection."

"Are you in danger?" His mother asked, the tone filling with worry.

"Only a formality," Jazz with, chuckling. "Anyone important who comes to Denver gets an escort. My boss lives by the motto that he'd rather pay us to stand around with nothing to do than deal with the consequences of leaving someone unprotected."

"But nothing's happening," Paul reassured his mother. Not right now, anyone, he added mentally, so it wouldn't be an outright lie.

"That's right, Misses Heeran, everything's quiet." Jazz took a step back. "And I'll make myself scarce, now that he's home."

"You don't have to," his mother said. "You're welcome to come in."

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't want to intrude. You have my number, Paul. Call me when you're ready to leave and I'll come pick you up." The look and tone made it clear his desired no longer mattered. They were driving back to Denver.

Maybe Thomas would be available to take them back to Denver... or take her back there. The surprise at his uncertainty in returning west was cut short by his mother calling him from inside the out.

"How are you doing?" he asked, stepping inside and taking out his buzzing phone to turn it off. "No one important," he said at her tilted ear. He didn't want the constant interruption while he was with his mother.

"I'm fine," she answered somewhat dismissively after considering him for a second. "I'm taking it easy like they want. Working from home, not exerting myself. Listening to them, you'd think I had a heart attack instead of fainting. They don't want me to do anything." She motioned to the couch. "Sit." Then headed for the kitchen. "I'll bring us something and you can tell me everything."

Not everything. Definitely not everything.

He sat and looked around. So little had changed since his last visit, and the heaviness of how things might change soon made itself felt. He hadn't explained how, but Denton had said this was the kind of things that changed worlds.

What if one of those changes was that his childhood home was destroyed? His mother—he didn't want to go there.

She returned and placed a beer before him before sitting opposite him with hers in hand. "How are you, really?"

How was he?

He'd had an entire bus ride to mull over the question. He'd even asked Jazz for her input, since she'd seen more combat situations than he had. In one direct question, his mother had wiped away any semblance of certainty he'd built.

He took a long swallow as he realized he was going to have to tell her more than he'd intended.

"Things haven't been great," he admitted.

"Paul, if they—"

"It's not about them. My cousins." He saw her desire to protest, but she remained silent. "You know magic's real, and all that stuff. One group's set on... changing the status quo." That would have to be enough unless she pressed. He doubted his mother was ready for the revelation gods were real, let alone that in danger of being murdered. "In a way big enough that those who know what's going on are talking about it in end-of-the-world terms."

Her eyes widened, and he hurried to add, "They won't let it get to that. We're working on stopping them." We. So, he no longer doubted where he wanted to be in this. It was what would keep his mother safe. "We already did something that moves the odds in our favor, even if they tried to stop us, but..."

"Paul?" she asked worriedly when he didn't start back up.

He let out a breath. "I did something while they were trying to stop us."

"Wait." Her tone turned suspicious. "When you say they tried to stop you. You mean you were part of that, as in you were there?" She was on his feet. "They put you in danger?"

"It was my choice." The forcefulness of his rebuttal got through, and she stared at him in dismay. "Thomas's involved, mom. I couldn't not help him. Now, if things turn back, all this could go away." He motioned around them, but he saw she understood he meant closer as she sat.

"But you're just one boy."

"I'm a man, Mom. And there's magic involved. I've gained a few... talents because of it."

"Then you can keep us safe from here."

"It's not going to happen here. I need to go where it'll be."

"To keep me safe," she whispered.

"And because too many people have already died making sure we get the change to stop this. Good people." He settled himself. "Some I knew. I can't let that be in vain."

"But you could be..."

He nodded.

He had no illusions. Even if they didn't put him on the front line, because who in their right minds wanted to anger the Orrs by putting their cousin in danger, there was no

way to ensure his safety unless they kept him from helping altogether.

And that only if they won.

“No.” His mother was on her feet again, her tone firm. “I forbid you from going.”

“Mom. I’m not a child you can ground anymore.”

“You are my son, Paul Heeran. I will keep you safe however I have to.”

“It isn’t your responsibility.” He sighed. “It’s no one’s job to ‘keep me safe’ but mine. And I get to decide how I do that, or if I think someone else’s safety is more important.”

“You don’t have to play at being a hero, Paul,” she said, desperation slipping in her voice.

“I’m not playing, Mom,” his tone turned darker as he couldn’t keep from seeing the doberman. “And I’m no hero. I ra—”

The knock on the door had him snap his muzzle shut so fast his teeth rattled.

“Is your friend back?” His mother headed for the door.

That had been too forceful for the petite otter. He followed her and caught her as she stumbled back on, opening the door and revealing Dietrich standing on the other side.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he demanded, steadying his mother.

“There are some things your mother needs to know.”

“Oh, and they just couldn’t wait, could they? You couldn’t tell her over the phone like a fucking normal person.”

“Paul, do not test my patience.”

“Don’t you speak to my son like that,” his mother warned, regaining her footing.

Dietrich turned his gaze to her. “You knew magic existed before Paul told you.”

“What are you talking about?” Paul demanded.

“Your mother’s scared of magic on a level that only happens with those who’ve been victims of it. I don’t remember your mother. I might not be interested in women, but you are distinctive enough that I would have. The explanation is that I was drugged.”

He stepped into the house, and Paul’s mother stepped between him and her son.

“The thing that’s been nagging at me is that you recognized me. That means you weren’t drugged, or at least not the way I was. You seem like a decent woman, so I don’t think you’d have gone along with taking advantage of me in whatever state I was put into. So a form of magic had to have been used to get you to have sex with me.”

“Get out!” Paul ordered, but his mother grabbed his arm without moving hard enough he had to look at her. He didn’t think he’d ever need her so scared.

He was going to fucking kill him for doing this to his—

“They didn’t know about Paul,” Dietrich said.

What? “What are you talking about?” Paul demanded, his anger fizzling at whatever this might be.

“I can’t even imagine why they’d do something like this,” his father continued, ignoring his question. “But those two aren’t men you need to ever worry about showing up to threaten you or Paul.”

“Who?” she asked, her tone a mix of caution and curiosity.

“My brothers,” Dietrich answered, frowning as he studied her face. “Donald and Danny. Twins. They were killed a few years ago.” He frowned some more and asked, “You never saw them?”

She shook her head. "I never met any of the Orrs who were twins," she said, then looked terrified.

Paul looked from his mother to Dietrich as she leaned back into him. His father's frown deepened even more. "Damien was already out of the picture then, and Dominic's too m—"

Her gasp and covering of her muzzle had Paul and Dietrich staring at her.

"What?" Paul asked, as Dietrich's face became a mask of controlled anger.

"It looks like I'm about to become an only child," he told Paul, then looked at his mother. "I'm sorry you were used as part of this, but I'm not sorry about the results." He turned and walked out.

"Mom, what is he—Mom!"

His mother was limp in his arms.

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"She's going to be fine," the doctor said. "Just another fainting spell. Since you caught her this time, she doesn't have any injuries. I would like to keep her overnight, since this is twice in under a week, but I'm confident this was because she was still recuperating from her minor concussion, and the excitement was too much."

Paul nodded, holding her hand. He'd been terrified this had been a heart attack, even if he knew those didn't cause someone to simply go limp. Fortunately, Jazz had answered his call and been there within minutes with a rental.

"I'm fine," his mother said, forcing a smile. "It was just a lot to remember."

"Can I get you something?" he asked her. What he wanted was an explanation, but if Dietrich bringing this up had caused this, forcing her to talk about it again might make things worse. And there was someone he could go to for answers.

But he wasn't making that call here.

"Tea would be nice."

He smiled. "I'll be right back."

He had the phone to his ear as soon as he was out of the room, ignoring Jazz, who fell into step with him.

"What the fuck was that about?" he demanded of his father as soon as he answered.

"Paul," the man said, his voice hard, "I don't think—"

"I just found out I'm the result of magical ra—" he swallowed. "Rape. And you think your brothers are responsible. I think I'm entitled to some elaborations."

"Brother. Dominic. And knowing that, I have an idea why he did it. Although I'd never thought he was capable of that kind of deviousness back then."

"Care to tell me?"

"There's this family legend that in each generation, only one of the sons can start a family. There's supposed to be evidence of the times when another tried and how the boys and their father died horribly each time, but it isn't like we can look back in time and know —"

"Can't you?" there were precogs and Thomas had mentioned someone how could hold and object and see it's past so it should—

"Who cares?" Dietrich was quiet. "You're proof it's nothing more than superstitious bullshit. Probably started back when one of them didn't want the competition. Dominic was

loyal to our father. The first thing the twins did after dethroning him, was fuck that out of our brother.”

Dietrich chuckled. “Only, while I think it fucked some sense into my brother, I think he pulled the wool over their eyes and wasn’t as cured of his loyalty as they thought. I think you were his attempt at avenging our father. If the legend was true, your birth could have caused the death of the twins and their boys.”

“Or yours, right?”

“It’s not like he liked me anymore than I like him.”

“That’s... I have no idea what to call it. Machiavellian doesn’t seem to do it justice.”

“Painful is what it’s going to be for him. I’m tempted to call him to let him know I’m on my way just so he can freak out over why *I’d* want to see him.”

“Are you really going to kill him?”

The silence took long enough Paul was afraid of what he’d hear.

Dietrich sighed. “No. The kids would be pissed, and I’d have to deal with their tantrum about how we aren’t like that anymore and all that bullshit. I’ll just make him wish I had killed him. Might pay Anakin to fuck him, so my brother has that pain to look forward to again in a year. Don’t worry,” he said in what Paul thought he meant as a soothing tone.

“Nothing about what I’m going to do will come back to hurt you. I’ll make sure Dominic understands you’re off-limit.”

“Would he...”

“Me and him, we’re from the older generation. Not the nice one that in power now. We can be particularly nasty in our vindictiveness.”

Before Paul could find his voice, the call ended without his father even saying goodbye.

He made it to the coffee shop next to the gift shop and back, tea in hand, the daze still hovering over him. The rat standing by his mother’s door, waving in his direction, snapped him out of it.

Paul stopped, startling as Jazz took another step before stopping. He’d utterly forgotten she was there. Hadn’t even thought to ask if she wanted something. He looked at Thomas, wondering if he should turn around when the rat raised a hand, holding a medallion.

He breathed easier, realizing it had to be the protection Denton had given him. And what it meant.

“I guess the break’s over,” he told Jazz, as Thomas walked toward them. “It’s back to saving the world for us.”

“Not quite,” Thomas said. He took the cup in Paul’s hand and handed it to Jazz, then looked around the empty corridor. “After you’ve handed that to his mother, make your way to Sigma Theta Gamma. Someone at Steel Link can tell you where they are. I’ll be there in a bit to pick you up.”

Before Paul could ask what that was about, he and the rat were no longer in the hospital