

Storyboard-31

When said that getting Paul an escort for his trip who wouldn't be affected by his out-of-control ability wouldn't be a problem, he had no idea what he could mean. He realized, as he reached the bus terminal, that he'd forgotten that, unlike Royal Security, Steel Link was a security company first, Society second.

Women worked there. He had seen them, but somehow the idea that one could be who accompanied hadn't registered.

There was no missing the otter in the steel gray ensemble that had more in common with tactical body armor than the business suit it was trying to pass itself 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." She had a Spanish accent that gave her words a slightly lyrical sound. "I've been authorized to go as far as knocking you out if you start looking over a guy in appreciation."

Paul was stopped short as he offered her his hand to shake. "Really?"

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

Paul hesitated, unsure he believed her, then decided there was little he could do if she did anything to him. All the gifts he had been given couldn't match someone who actually knew what they were doing.

"Please call me Paul, since we're going to be traveling together for a few days."

"You have your pass?" she asked, taking out her phone. "You know, we could get a car. It would save us a day, especially if we switch."

"Do you know who Adam Orr is?" Paul took his phone out and made sure the pass Ernest had sent him was active.

"He's the driver. We have a few guys with his gift."

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

"Okay, but I can still drive us there."

Paul shrugged. "Won't it take just as long, since we'll have to stop each night? You might as well relax, too." He found the bus and headed for it.

Jazz muttered something in Spanish, then followed him.

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His phone buzzed with another message from Adam as Paul stepped off the bus. After the first rant of everything his cousin was going to do to him for getting on a bus, of all things, he'd ignored every other one. He didn't want to erase them, in case Adam took offense to that too, but he was beginning to wonder if there was a chance his message buffer had a maximum and what happened once it was reached.

Jazmyn stretched with a satisfied sigh.

Paul understood her offer to drive now, as she had trouble sitting still. She'd spend

every stop walking around, and Paul had almost offered for them to rent a car, but she'd gotten back on the bus without complaint each time and by then Adam had started messaging him and without an outside motivation to get a car, Paul just wanted to keep infuriating his cousin.

Which was one of the reasons he walk by the share-ride waiting outside the Minneapolis bus terminal.

"We could be driven there," Jazz pointed out.

"It's not worth the money, and there's a bus stop by my mother's house." He smiled at her. "Don't worry, you can remain standing in the Minneapolis city buses."

Her reply was in Spanish, but the tone made it clear it wasn't a compliment.

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Paul wavered between unlocking the door and entering, and knocking. He was always welcome, he knew that, but it had been years since he'd come unexpectedly. Every visit while he studied in San Francisco had to be planned around his classes and his mother's work schedule, so she'd always known and had picked him up from the airport. Now he felt 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 me to say you were coming? I'd have picked you up."

He hugged his mother. "I didn't want to worry you, Mom."

He looked at him. "Paul Heeran, I'm your mother. I always worry."

He rolled his eyes. "And I didn't want to add to the usual motherly kind."

She chuckled and looked at him, then noticed the otter. "I'm sorry, hello."

"Mom, this is Jazz, she's..." Paul trailed off in trying to find a way to formulate an introduction that wouldn't make his mother worry.

"Jazmyn Haleigh Cojuangco Corpuz," she said, offering her hand. "Your son's an important person, and my boss didn't want him to just roam around without some form of protection."

"Are you in danger?" his mother asked, worried, and Jazz chuckled.

"It's just a formality. Anyone of importance who comes to Denver gets an escort. My boss lives by the motto that he'd rather pay us while nothing's happening than deal with the consequences."

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

"That's right, and I'll make myself scarce now that he's home."

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

"I appreciate the offer, Misses Heeran, but I'd just be intruding. You have my number. Call me when you're ready to leave and I'll come to pick you up." The look and tone made it clear that whatever he wanted, they were driving back to Denver.

It might be worth checking if Thomas was free to take him back to Denver; if he decided to return. His surprise at the uncertainty was cut short by his mother calling him. She was already in the house, looking at him, concerned.

“How are you doing?” he asked, closing the door behind him. “After the hospital stay?”

“I’m fine,” she answered after a second of watching him. “I’m taking it easy like they want, working from home, not exerting myself. You’d think I had a heart attack instead of fainting, the way they want me to not do anything,” she added, walking to the kitchen. “Sit.” She indicated the couch. “I’ll bring us something and you can tell me everything.”

Paul wasn’t sure he’d get to everything.

Sitting there, looking around the room that had barely changed since his last visit, he felt the heaviness of what he knew was approaching. Even if they won, Denton said the world might change. He hadn’t said how, but what if one of the things was that his childhood home was destroyed? His mother—he didn’t want to think that.

She returned and placed a beer down before sitting opposite him. “How are you, really?”

How was he? He has spent the bus ride going over the question, even asking Jazz for her input, since she’d seen far more combat situations than he had, but having his mother ask him directly wiped away any semblance of certainty he’d built.

He took a long swallow and realized he had to tell her more than he intended.

“Things haven’t been great,” he admitted.

“Paul, if they—”

“It’s not about them. My cousins.” He saw her need to protest, but she remained silent. “You know magic’s real, and all that stuff. One group’s set on...changing the status quo.” He didn’t know if his mother was ready for the revelation that gods were real, let alone 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. They don’t think it’s going to get to that,” he added as her eyes grew wide. “We’re going to stop them.” We. There was no longer any doubt he wanted to help end this. He had to do what he could to keep his mother safe. “We already did something that moves the odds in our favor, despite them trying to stop us, but...”

“Paul?” she asked worriedly.

He let out a breath. “I did something while that happened.”

“Wait, you were there? When you say they tried to stop you, you mean you, you? They put you in danger?” Her tone rose as she got angry.

“It was my choice,” he stated forcefully to get through to her. It worked, and she stared at him in dismay. “Thomas’ involved. I couldn’t not help him. And now, if things go bad, all this could go away.” He motioned around them, but she understood what he meant.

“But you’re just one boy.” She sat.

“I’m a man, Mom. And there’s magic involved. I’ve gained a few... talents because of it.”

“Can’t you stay here? Can’t you keep us safe from here?”

“It’s not going to happen here. So I have to go where it’ll be.”

“To keep me safe.”

“That, and because people have already died making sure we have the chance to stop

them. Good people. Some I knew. I can't let that be in vain."

"But you could..."

He nodded. He had no illusions about it. Even if they wouldn't put him on the front line because no one would want to risk angering his cousins by causing his death, there was no way to ensure his safety unless they kept him from helping, and then only if they won. Paul wanted to be there to push the odds in their favor in whatever small way he could.

"No." His mother was on her feet. "I forbid you from going."

"Mom." Paul stood. "I'm not a child you can ground anymore."

"You are my son, Paul Heeran and I will keep you safe however way I have to."

"It isn't your responsibility. It's no one's job to 'keep me safe' but my own, and I get to decide how I do that or if I think someone else's safety is more important than mine."

"You don't have to play at being a hero, Paul."

"This isn't playing, Mom. And I'm no hero. I ra—"

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

"Is your friend back?" his mother asked, heading for the door.

The knocking had been too forceful for him to think it was Jazz. He followed her and was there to catch her as she stumbled back after opening the door and seeing Dietrich standing on the other side.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Paul demanded, steadying her.

"There are some things your mother needs to know."

"And they can't wait? You can't tell her over the phone like fucking normal people?"

"Paul, don't test my patience."

"Don't you use that one of voice on my son," his mother said.

Dietrich nodded. "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 if you've been the victim of it. I don't remember your mother. I might not be interested in women, but you are distinctive enough that I would have. I was drugged; that explained why. The thing that's been nagging at me is that you recognized me. That means you weren't drugged, or at least not the same way. You seem to be a decent woman, and I don't think you would have gone along with taking advantage of me in whatever state I was put into. So I think that magic was used to get you to have sex with me."

"Get out," Paul ordered, but his mother's grip tightened on him. He looked at her and she was scared. More scared than he'd ever seen her.

Dietrich nodded. "I don't think they knew about Paul. I can't even imagine why they'd do something like this, but those are two people you don't have to worry about threatening you anymore."

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

"My brothers," Dietrich answered, seeming confused by her reaction. "Donald and Danny, twins. They were killed a few years ago," He search her face and frowned. "You never saw them?"

She shook her head. "I never met any of the Orrs who were twins," she said, then looked as if she said something that would get her killed. Paul looked from his mother to Dietrich, who was frowning even more. "Damian was already out of the picture, and Dominic is too—"

Her gasp and subsequent covering of her muzzle had Paul and Dietrich looking 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 looked at Paul, then at his mother. "I am sorry you were used as part of this, but I'm not sorry about the result." Dietrich turned and walked out.

"Mom?" Paul asked, hoping she'd have some answer for him, but he realized he was holding her unconscious body. "Mom!"

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

Paul nodded, holding her hand. He'd been terrified she had had a heart attack, even if, now that he could think clearly, he knew her falling unconscious wasn't how it happened. Fortunately, Jazz had been there within minutes, driving a rental car and the trip to the hospital had been quick.

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

"Can I get you something?" Paul asked his mother. What he wanted was to ask for an explanation, but if having Dietrich talk about it had caused this, getting her to explain it might be worse, and anyway, there was someone he could go to for his answers, but he wasn't making that call with her there.

"Tea would be nice," she said.

"I'll be right back."

He had his 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, I don't think—"

"I just found out I'm the result of a magical ra—" he swallowed. "Rape. And you think your brothers cause it. I think I'm entitled to some elaboration."

"Brother, Dominic. And knowing that, I think I have an idea why he did it, although I wouldn't have thought he was capable of that kind of deviousness back then."

"Okay, care to tell me?"

"There's this family legend through our history, that only one son can have sons of his own per generation. There's supposed to be evidence of the other boys and their father dying horribly any time it wasn't respected, but it isn't like we can look back in time and know for sure."

"Can't you—"

"Who cares." Dietrich was silent for a few seconds. "You are proof it's nothing more

than superstitious bullshit. Probably started way 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 loyalty out of our brother. Did it some good if you ask me, but now I think Dominic might have also pulled a bit of the wool over their eyes and not be cured as he let them believe. I think you were his attempt at avenging what they did to our father. If the legend was true, there was a chance your birth would have caused them and their son's death."

"That's... I have no idea what to even 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 and tell him when I'll be landing just so he can freak out about why I'd want to see him."

"Are you really going to kill him?"

The answer took long enough that Paul was afraid of what he'd hear.

"No. The kids would be pissed and then I'd have to deal with their tantrums about how we aren't like that anymore and all that bullshit. I'll just make him wish I'd just 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 about it. Nothing's going to impact you. I'll make sure Dominic understands you are off-limit."

"Would he..."

"Me and him, we're from the older generation. Not the nice one that's in power now. We can be really nasty in our revenge."

Paul found he couldn't respond to that. And in the silence, Dietrich ended the call without even saying goodbye.

He bought the tea from the coffee shop by the gift shop, still dazed from what he'd found out. And was only snapped out of it when he saw who was waiting by his mother's room.

Thomas waved at them and Paul slowed. His friend pulled something from under his shirt, and Paul realized it was the protection Denton had given him.

"I guess the break's over," Paul told Jazz. "It's back to saving the world for us."

"Not quite," Thomas said, taking the cup out of Paul's hand and handing it to the otter. He looked around the empty hall. "After you handed that to his mother, make your way to Sigma Theta Gamma. I'm sure someone at Steel Link can give you direction and I'll be there in a bit to pick you up."

Before Jazz, or Paul, could ask what this was about, he was no longer in the hospital.