

## Chapter 24

“Paul!” his mother said as soon as she answered, sounding relieved. “How are you?”

Paul leaned against the building’s metal wall, looking up at the gray clouds. “I’m fine, mom.” This wasn’t a call he’d wanted to do in Dietrich’s office, or even his gym. “I—”

“Why didn’t you call me sooner? Why wasn’t you phone taking my calls? Do you have any idea how worried I was? The only things those so-called friends of yours would tell me after that cryptic message was that you were okay.”

“I’m sorry, mom.” A quick look at his history didn’t show he’d missed any of her calls. “Things... escalated.” It had to be Shila’s fault. Something she’d added without telling him. Not that he was telling his mother that. She wouldn’t take it well that someone had cut him off from her. “I don’t know why your calls didn’t connect, but I’m back in San Francisco now, and—”

“Good. They wouldn’t tell me where you were, either. I take it you’re looking for a lab to work at then? You know that if it gets too hard, or you’re running low on money, you can move back to Minneapolis. Your room’s more or less as you left it, and you also have friends here who—”

“Mom.” He hated cutting her off, but she could go on about all the reasons he should move back home, now that he no longer needed to be in San Francisco for his studies. “Look, I’m sorry if this is coming out of left-field, but did you know Dietrich Orr was my father?”

Her silence stretched enough he worried.

“Not until your graduation,” she finally said. “I never knew his name. It... never came up.” He sighed in relief. “Paul, is everything okay?”

Maybe he should have been quieter about it.

“It is now. The worse that’s going to happen is that I’ll have to take a job working for him, but that’s not too—”

“Paul Heeran. I have raised you better than to let some man bully you into accepting anything. I don’t care if that man’s supposed to be your father. He’s still some stranger who had nothing to do with you until now.”

“Mom, I’m known him for a few years now. He didn’t know we were related either until now. He was just Madoc’s boss and a guy I got to know.” He didn’t elaborate. He certainly wasn’t mentioning how they’d danced, since his mother knew what else it implied. “The job offer came before this, and it was just an offer for me to look at and decide if it fit. Having to accept it has more to do with his nephew. They kinda run the city, so I think they—”

“What do you mean, they run the city? I never came across anyone named Orr when I read about San Francisco.”

Paul chuckled. His mother had started researching the city even before he’d moved there. The moment Paul had set his sight on doing his doctorate there, she’d started looking for all the way in which Minneapolis was better than San Francisco Bay.

“They don’t hold any official positions. They just make sure things run the way they want it and that benefits the city.” The silence stretched again. “Mom?”

“Get out of there, Paul,” she whispered quickly.

“Mom, it’s okay. They—”

“No, Paul. Listen to me. I don’t care if they’re related to you. Do you have any idea what you described? You want nothing to do with men like those. Paul, trust me on that.”

“Mom, I know it doesn’t sound ideal, but—”

“Paul, they’re criminals. They’re mobsters.”

That she mirrored how Paul tried not to think of them bothered him.

“They aren’t that bad,” he said reflexively, and immediately felt like he was lying. Dietrich didn’t seem that bad, and Madoc has said he’d used a stronger version of Paul’s power on him. He has the sense the others weren’t any better. “And I need their help. The power I got isn’t like the others and I need them to show me how to contro—”

His mother’s phone clacked on a hard surface.

“Mom?” The sound he heard as he was about to call to her again was one he’d gotten too familiar with over the last few days. A body dropping to the floor.

The dread mounted as he waited for the coming demands. The Chamber explaining that if he wanted to ever see his mother again; he needed to deliver Grant, Thomas, and the whole of the Society to them. When the seconds stretched without that happening, his fear shifted.

“Mom?” he yelled. She wasn’t exactly young anymore, and he’d just dropped that he was magical on her without meaning to. He looked around for anyone he could tell to call 911, but he’d picked this spot because of how isolated it was.

He ended the call and made the other one.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“I think my mom had a heart attack.”

“Stay calm, I’ll—”

“Not here.” He almost yelled. “She’s in Minneapolis, probably at home.” He gave the address. “I was on the phone with her, then I heard her fall and she wasn’t responding anymore.”

“Alright, let me contact Minneapolis’ emergency services. You’ll be able to listen in. I’m not going to put you on hold. Is that acceptable?” The calmness with which she spoke assuaged Paul’s frayed nerves.

“Yes, thank you.”

He listened as she spoke with another person and they dispatched an ambulance. He fought the need to tell them to hurry. He knew they drove as fast as they could, as fast as the roads let them. They were professionals.

The paramedics spoke to each other as they exited the ambulance, going through the steps as they gathered their equipment, made their way to the door, unlocked it. Even if he didn’t understand most of the medical language, it comforted him. Reminded him of the lunchroom at the university, with all the medical students discussing their classes.

They then sounded concerned as they called her name again, and Paul swallowed. They located her in the kitchen, stating where they were as one of them explained she was on the floor without visible injuries. She was unresponsive; they said in a hurried, but professional tone, then they Paul couldn’t follow the jargon.

They had her on the stretcher, heading to the ambulance.

“She’s in good hand,” the operator said. “The hospital has your number and they will contact you with news. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Stay on the line, he wanted to beg. Tell me every step of what mother is going through. Tell me that my mother is still alive. Don’t abandon me. Don’t... don’t leave me alone.

“No, thank you for everything you did,” he said in a forcefully neutral tone. And then, so she wouldn’t be the one to cut him off from his mother, he terminated the call.

[I figure that all of that belongs in the previous chapter]

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Paul stared at his phone, waiting for another update. He barely recalled the Share-Ride to the hotel from Dietrich’s gym. He couldn’t stay there, and he couldn’t go to anyone he knew, so a hotel had felt like the safest thing. He’d told the driver to take him to an affordable one and let them drive.

There had been one call from the hospital letting him know they’d checked her in and that her insurance was in order. There, there had been one as he stepped into the room, informing him they were starting the tests. Then the latest, only a few minutes before, where they’d informed him that she hadn’t had a heart attack. She’d fainted and, as best as they could tell, had given herself a mild concussion when she fell. They were keeping her overnight, and they’d call him if something happened.

And now he sat alone, relieved his mother was okay and terrified that the next call would be to let him know things had taken a turn for the worse. He needed to do something other than sit here and wait.

He wanted to go to a friend and have them distract him, but the problem was that all the guys he

knew and liked enough to want to be way, he was interested in, and none of the women he'd befriended during his classes knew anything about magic. So it was either have his aura force him to fight off sexual advances so he could vent, or read in one of his mundane friend into the magical world. And he didn't want either of those things.

Fuck. What he wanted was for his mother to hug him and tell him everything was going to be okay.

How old had he been the last time he'd felt like this?

The knock had him up and at the door with irrational belief it was here, here to comfort him. He pulled it open as the realization it could be one of his friends hit him, but it was too late now.

The rat standing on the other side of the door looked him up and down. "You've looked better," Judith said. Paul reflexively moved out of the way instead of being bowled over by a Hertz woman, and she stepped inside.

"How are you here?" Paul asked once the door was closed.

"Really?" she tilted an ear, looking the small room over. "Who else was Thomas going to call to check in on you?"

"Madoc?"

"Maybe. You were at that gym when you vanished."

"What I want to know is how you found out where I am." Paul didn't even know that at this point.

The smile she gave him had caused men to walk into walls. Paul had witnessed it happening twice. "You are so sweet when you can't think."

"I can think—" his ears plastered themselves against his skull in embarrassment. "Trevor."

"And the innumerable ways he has to find out stuff through Royal Security." She looked him over again. "I'd have never guessed."

He looked down at himself. "Guessed what?"

"That you're an Orr."

His shoulders sagged. "Yeah. I—"

"Oh no, you don't." She was in his space, and he was forced to step back. "I so did not come here to witness a pity party."

"I know," Paul said defensively. "You're here to check-in on me so you can tell the others how I'm doing."

She motioned to him. "And what? You want me to tell them you're a miserable mess?" She shook her head. "I do that and they're going to be kicking in that door, then your new power kicked in and makes all of them was to bang you and—" she paused, her expression becoming speculative. "You know, that might be fun to watch." She shook herself before Paul could object. "No, Judith Hertz, you are here to cheer Paul um not get an eyeful of amazingly hot guy fuck."

"And how are you planning on doing that?" He asked suspiciously. It was never a good sign when Judith Hertz picked anything over sex. Thomas still didn't believe there wasn't a connection between the women in his family and the female version of the Society. Once he'd learned about the Convent, he'd been certain that explained why the Hertz women were so sexual.

"Why?" She gave him another of her intellect-shattering smiles. "I'm taking you shopping."

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How had he let this happen?

Paul had grown up watching the Hertz women pull men along with their smiles and beauties, getting them to help with errands no sane man wanted to take part in. First, Thomas's mother. Not only with her husband, but with any man who passed by when she needed assistance. Then Judith, once she was old enough to realize the power she had.

Paul knew better than to let any of them rope him into anything.

Then why did he now have to juggle a bag filled with kid's clothing, a box of toys and more boy's outfit piled over his shoulder as he followed Judith into a baby furniture store?

He started as she stopped to study a displayed crib and searched for the boxed version. There was no way she expected him to carry that on top of everything else already filling his arms.

And why would she even want him to carry a crib? Why was she looking at cribs?

"Oh, my God," he exclaimed.

She grinned at him.

He looked at the clothing he carried, just to be sure. He hadn't paid attention as she piled them on. They seemed small for Ryan, and orange was definitely not his color. Ryan was all reds.

“Really?”

She squalled and jumped in place as she nodded. He went to hug her and was reminded of everything he held. “We’re going to need someplace I can put these down.”

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Paul looked at the boxed crib on the floor by the table and still couldn’t believe the ease with which Judith had gotten a man walking by to carry it to the food court for her. Paul’s Chow-mein was untouched as he still processed the news while she ate for... Well, two, he had to guess.

“How did it take so long?” he asked. “I mean, sure, Trevor has guys to work off his horniness on, but neither of you are exactly shy about telling us how often you go at it.”

“Magic,” she answered before slurping her peanut butter milkshake.

“Isn’t that how they usually make sure kids happen?” Thomas had given him the five-second rundown of how men as gay as the Society went about ensuring they had kids. In the same breath, he’d said he didn’t know if he liked the method.

“Knowing how to make sure it happens helps make sure it doesn’t.” She bit into her burger.

“Okay. Why the three year wait? You two were overjoyed when Ryan arrived, and you both love raising him. We figured there was going to be an even dozen before the year was done.”

“Just seven,” she replied, before popping an onion ring in her mouth. That was an oddly specific number. But before he could ask about it, she went on. “Trevor didn’t want us to have them one after the other like machines. That’s too much like what that old elder of his is doing things. So he decided we’d wait a couple of years between each.”

“Then with wanting seven, you two are going to want to...” Red for Ryan, Orange for who was coming next. The oddly specific number of seven for the total. He groaned. “Please tell me you are not seriously going to saddle your kids with being a rainbow.”

She grinned at him, dunking a fry in the strawberry milkshake.

He chuckled. “They are going to hate you so much by the time they’re teens.”

She shrugged. “They can go to their father for comfort.”

“Still, you’re going to want to pick up the pace if you don’t want to be old before the last one comes out.”

The smile she gave him before taking another bite of her burger told him she was already working on that. After all, she said that Trevor had decided to take their time.

“Had Thomas talked about kids?” she asked before putting the blueberry turnover to her mouth.

“Not recently. It’s how I know they use magic for that. He wasn’t impressed.”

“Really?” she gave him a look as she slurped on the peanut butter milk shake.

“Why?”

“He and dad were talking a few days ago. He was asking dad about what it was like raising him and Roland. You know, the baby and toddler years. I asked him afterward, but he just evaded, saying he had to find the right person first.”

“That...seems reasonable to me,” Paul answered, and she raised an eyebrow. “You want me to pry and get him to spill whatever you feel he didn’t tell you.”

“There’s the smart tiger I know and love. You’re going to make you family proud.”

“Proud, sure.” He stared at his plate of chow-mein and tried to force his appetite back. “Have you spoken with Vic recently? Do you know where he stands on him or his sons officially joining the Society?”

“He shouldn’t bother,” someone said. “Bunch of assholes, the lot of them.” The tiger stepped to the table and looked them over. Behind him were two men; a bison and a deer. The two were dressed casually, but carried themselves in a way that reminded Paul of the Chamber people that had been in the camp where they’d found Wassa.

“First off,” Adam said as Paul opened his mouth to ask what he was doing here. “What the fuck were you thinking going to that hole of a place to stay? You do know we own hotels actually worth setting foot in, right? Second,” he cut Paul off, about to point out it was a place he could afford, unlike whatever the tiger meant. “If you’re going to hide somewhere, fucking be there when I go to pick you up.”

Paul waited.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” Adam demanded.

“You could have called.”

“And watch you make a run for the state line?” he snorted. “No thanks. You have no idea how lucky you are that Dietrich called to tell us you were at his club, because Arnie and Aaron were fighting over who

was going to lead the team hunting you down.”

Judith snickered.

“You have a problem?” Adam demanded of her.

She shook her head. “I’m just amused that drama’s a family trait.”

“And who the fuck ate you?” Adam demanded.

“Are you implying I’m dramatic?” Paul asked.

She ignored him in favor of Adam, smiling. “I’m Trevor’s wife.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?”

Her smile brightened. “He works at Royal Security.”

“What does where he works...” he narrowed his eyes. “Are you fucking comparing me to Aaron? I am nothing like him. He takes a side glance and turns it into an attack on his honor. That’s dramatic.” He straightened. “I’m efficient, and I don’t like wasting my time. There’s nothing dramatic about that.”

“If you say so.” She plonked the straw into the strawberry milkshake and slurped loudly.

Paul stared at her. He knew the Hertz women were a force to be reckoned with, but he hadn’t known they had balls large enough to take on an Orr.

“You should go with him,” she told Paul. “He wouldn’t be in such a tizzy if it wasn’t important.

“I am not in a tizzy,” Adam snapped.

“Oh, then Paul can stay?”

“No fucking way. Arnold’s going to rip my balls and ship them to those women if I don’t get back with him.”

“See, tizzy.” She smiled. “You better go, Paul.”

“Are you sure? What about these?”

“Oh, don’t worry about them.” She turned the smile on the two security men. “I’m sure one of those strong and virile men will be happy to help me carry all of this, won’t you?”

“I’ll do it,” the bison said, raising a hand, then hurried to lower it as Adam glared at him.

“Just who do you work for?” the tiger demanded, and Judith chuckled. “You know what? Fuck it. I have better things to do than question your manliness right now.” He looked at the deer. “What about you? Feel like helping her too?”

“No, sir. With all due respect to the lady, I don’t carry people’s packages.”

“She ain’t no lady,” Adam grumbled as he walked away.

Paul had to agree, following him. Judith was no lady.

She was a Hertz Woman.