

Chapter 22

Denton unbuckled his seatbelt, now that the sign was off and stretched. The others did the same, even standing to walk. Oscar went to a small fridge to get something to eat. The margay had been given the all clear by Maximilian after an intense questioning. What he'd remembered of Shirley's attack on him matched what he'd said before. He thought he remembered feeling odd before Maximilian put him under suspension, but no clear impressions.

Denton had never been in a private jet. He'd actually never flown before. The furthest he'd travel before now was when they had gone to his dad's mom's place, after the fire, and that was just a hundred miles north of the city.

It measured up to what he'd expected, from multiple movies and TV shows. A dozen swivel seats along each side of the fuselage, which could turn to be arranged around two tables. The fridge Oscar was taking a sandwich from as against the back wall, with a door to the left, behind which was a large bathroom, where the eight of them could take a shower together if they felt like it.

On the right of the fridge was a wooden liquor cabinet, and not for the first time, he found his gaze returning to it. He didn't know why, but it bugged him. It was well made, as far as he could tell, pale wood with a honey varnish. the doors latched with delicate hooks, and the glasses and bottles were secured in felt forms. He had no idea what about it kept nagging at him.

"Frank," Martin said, unbuttoning his jacket and shirt. "You have anything on the Orrs?"

Frank nodded and pulled out a tablet.

Denton stared at him, as did everyone else.

"Gawk all you want," Frank chimed, not looking up. "I'll remind you that I didn't know they existed until a couple of hours before take off." He glanced at everyone over the tablet. "You have no idea how many phone calls it took for me to find someone who knew about them. it would have taken even longer if I hadn't remembered the Solanos used to be in San Francisco. They had files. Horatio had to scan everything and email that to me. I haven't had any time to look them over. So, why don't you guys go and have sex while I read. Give me thirty minutes and I should have something to tell you guys."

Sex did sound like a good idea to Denton. He was curious what they could get up to in that shower. Instead Martin indicated the chair opposite him as he pulled up the table.

"You need to start learning the sigils." He licked the tip of his finger and traced a spiral on the black table top.

Denton looked at it. "Can't we do this with pen and paper?"

The cougar shrugged. "We could, but you're always going to end up doing them with your finger, might as well start now."

Denton licked his finger and did a spiral next to Martin's. "How precise does it have to be?"

"At this level not so much. The shape has to be there, at worst nothing's going to happen if you really screw it up. It's once you start making phrases with them that you have to be careful to get them right. A mistake when sigils have to interact together can really cause a problem. This one is the basic shielding. I figure you should get to know it first. It stops magical spying, and it can stop really minor magical attacks."

"That's what Stefan traced on my palm when I saw my dad."

"Yeah, to stop whoever was watching you at that point."

"So I trace that, and no one can see what I do."

"No. if someone is determined to spy on you, and has enough power at his disposal, he can punch through." He traced another spiral, larger this time, with more space between the lines, then added a zigzag in the empty space. "This is a stronger shield. It's still only one sigil, so you don't have to worry about causing harm, but the more precise you can make it, the stronger it will be."

"How many sigils are there?"

"Fred, how many sigils are on record?" Martin asked.

"Forty-eight within the Society."

"What do you mean within the Society?" Denton asked.

Fred stopped nuzzling Bruce. "All the factions manipulate the power their God give them differently. We use our body's fluid and sigils. The witches do basically the same since they use our female mirrors. Their sigils are different tho."

"There's a faction in Japan," Martin continued, "called the ten knives. They have to write kanji on a specially made paper, with a special ink, but after that it keeps for as long as neither gets damaged, so they can build a library. when they need one, they pull it out, put power in it and use it."

"Can't you do the same?" Denton asked. "Like in the van, and on the house."

"Yes, we sort of can. It's just not as simple for us. The best way to make a permanent sigil is to use blood, but that's dangerous. It takes a lot of skill to make one of those and not bound your own life force in it."

"It wasn't blood in the van."

"You're right. Fred and Oscar did that a few weeks ago. The problem with cum is that it degrades. even if you're careful not to scratch it off, you only get a few days until the energy dissipates. You can renew it, but even then, you end up having to reapply the sigils after a while. Precum gives you a few

hours at best, and feeding energy into one of those is a waste of time."

Denton nodded. "Saliva?"

"Not a life bearing fluid. We can't do anything with it."

"Some can?"

"Those who follow the Old Man of the Sea," Fred offered.

"They can use anything that's basically water. Fresh, sea, blood, cum, all usable by them, but only so long as there's water. Once that dries out, it's useless."

"How do they make sigils then?"

"They don't. I can't tell you if they do anything instead, there's almost no records left about them. Roman times are the last time one of them is known to have been alive."

"So that God's dead?" Denton asked.

Fred shrugged. "Possibly, science really did a number on some of the faction. When there's a 'scientific' explanation for what your God grants you, it's tough to keep believing in Him."

"And that doesn't worry you?"

"Science has yet to explain how I can blow something up by drawing a Phrase in cum. so no, I'm not worried."

Denton had to admit that was a good point. "So, you and Frank are what, walking magical encyclopedias?"

Frank chuckled, but didn't look up from his reading.

"I guess," Fred agreed. "We both like reading, and I've always been curious about the 'mechanics' of magic, while he's always enjoyed family histories."

The door to the pilot's cabin opened and a bison left it.

Martin quickly wiped with his sleeve the little that was still visible from the sigils he and Denton had traced.

"Good afternoon, sirs. I just wanted to inform you that we're on course to arrive at three-fifteen, local time, at the Cisco International Airport."

Denton checked his watch. Two and a half hours to do.

"Will you be needing anything?" The pilot asked.

"Actually," Oscar piped up. "Unless you guys need my help with anything, I could use someone to wash my back."

"You go have fun," Martin said, and the bison joined the margay in the bathroom.

"Well," Denton commented, looking after the closed door.

"At least someone will get a use out of that shower."

"Don't worry," Martin said. "you'll get to use it too. there's plenty of time. But right now I need you to practice your sigils."

"Isn't he one of you guys?" Denton asked, nodding to the area where the sigils have been.

"Only if you mean that he's gay. He isn't part of the Society."

"So you guys employ normal people?"

"Of course we do, hell we even hire women." Martin gave Denton a wry smile. "Do you think my dad's financial firm is staffed only by Society members?"

"I don't know. I have no idea how many of you guys there are."

"Not enough for that," Frank said. "There are a hundred eighty-seven families throughout the world. I don't have the most recent census, but there can't be more than ten thousand of us, worldwide. And not many families get along so well they would be willing to work tightly together."

"Then what are you guys? you work pretty well together, you get along."

A few uncomfortable glances were exchanged.

"Technically, I'm a hostage," Colby said.

"Say what?" Denton stared at him.

"His folks are in Dallas." Bruce said. "Them and Martin's family use to have a feud going for about a hundred year."

"Hundred twenty-three," Colby specified.

"Right. Archibald, Max's brother negotiated a peace agreement. part of it was that each family would send one son to the other, as a sort of insurance against attacks. Archie sent his eldest..."

"Trevor," Martin offered.

"And Colby got sent here."

"Technically, I should have been the one sent," Martin added, "since I'm the elder's son, but as an only child, Everyone agreed it couldn't be. That's why Trevor went. Last I hear from him, he's loving it there."

"It's warm," Colby grumbled.

Bruce slapped the armadillo's shoulder. "Stop bitching, scallie back. We keep you plenty warm."

Colby snorted, but smiled.

"The rest of you?"

"I came to the united states to study," Stefan replied, heading to the liquor cabinet. "I met Martin in university and we became friends. After I graduated I got permission to work for Max's firm." It took out a glass and a decanter.

Denton watched him as he filled the glass, transfixed, not hearing what the others were saying. The plane lurched, and Stefan pitched forward. He raised his hand to catch himself, and the glass shattered in it as closed fist hit the cabinet.

Stefan cursed loudly in German. Fred was next to him, grabbing a towel and cradling the hand.

"Sorry about that folks," Came a voice over the intercom. "Unexpected turbulence. I hope everyone's okay back there."

The collie glared at the speaker in the ceiling. He snarled

as Fred pulled a piece of glass out of his palm. "Fuck this hurts."

"At least you don't have to worry about infection right now. The alcohol in the bourbon should keep the wound clean."

"Let's not count on that." Frank handed his brother the first air kit, and Fred properly cleaned and bandaged the wound.

"I saw this happening," Denton said.

"I'd hope so," Bruce replied. "You were watching him the whole time."

"No, not now. This morning."

"What do you mean?" Stefan asked, wincing as Fred tightened the bandage.

"When we talked. I tried to read your mind, but I got a clip of you hurting yourself." He nodded to the collie's hand. "I thought you were remembering something."

"You tried to read my mind?" Stefan stared at him.

"You can read minds?" Martin asked.

"I read Max's. and I only tried to read yours because I really wanted to fix the problem we had."

"Reading minds isn't how you do it." Stefan sat down, glaring at Denton.

"Give him a break, Stefan. He's discovering his ability. we've all over used ours when it first manifested itself." Martin poured another bourbon and handed it to the collie.

"No," Colby said. "He steps out."

That stopped Martin.

And Denton. He hadn't thought about it that way. If stepping out of his body was his ability, he shouldn't be able to do more.

"Fred, Frank? Do you know of anyone who's ever had two abilities?" the cougar asked.

"Three," Stefan corrected, which earned him a stare. "What he did, seeing me get hurt before it happened. That's what I do. You fucked me a few days ago, so I still have some of your energy in me."

Everyone was looking at Denton.

"God was involved," Colby said.

"What else can you do?" Frank asked.

"I don't know. I didn't even know I could do that. Either of them. It just happened. Look can we just forget about this and get by to the important stuff?" Denton's ears burned from the attention.

"I think this is pretty important," Martin said. "It's never happened before. We only get one abilities. Most abilities can be duplicated, through sigils, but that isn't the same. Speaking of which. Fred. you know the healing sigil, why didn't you use it on him?"

"I'm not interesting in closing the wound if there's still glass in it. I don't know any of the Phrases to do more than that. When we land, we'll have doctor make sure it's clean, then I'll use it."

Martin kept his eyes on Denton for a moment longer before focusing on Frank. "Alright. Since you're not currently reading. What can you tell us about the Orrs?"

Fred gave his brother a coffee. "Okay. The Orrs moved to San Francisco sometime in the sixties. Don't know exactly when. And it was only two of them. Robert and Angelica Orr. Married couple, originally from New York City. They didn't do anything, which is why there's almost no information about them at that point.

"The Orrs first make waves in the early eighties, by getting a church shut down."

"How did they do that?" Fred asked.

"I'll get back to that in a bit."

"Over the next fifteen years, each and every church in the city closes. as far as records say, the church hasn't been able to get back any foothold there since ninety-five. that's when the Solanos were... encouraged to leave.

"As for how they did it. They can influence people."

"How so?" Denton asked.

"Like Martin can, except they can all do it, and they are stronger than you are."

"How is that possible?" Bruce asked.

"I'm with him," Denton added. "I thought everyone had different abilities."

"Within the Society," Frank agreed. "You have to remember, they aren't part of it. They made their own deal, which means they do things differently, and can do different things."

"So we're heading into what?" Denton asked. "A lawless city, run by hoods?"

Frank shook his head. "According to government reports, San Francisco has had the lowest crime rate since the early aughts. They legalized gay marriage before the California ever did."

"I remember reading about that in history class." Denton nodded. "every guy flocked there to get married and then had to deal with their states not recognizing it."

"Yeah, but they are probably the reason it was legal across the country by twenty-ten."

"Okay. So they don't sound too bad," Bruce said. "the way Max was talking I expected something like the mob."

"You might not be too far off the mark," Denton replied. "The mob is extremely good at keeping the peace in its territory because they are ruthless. You break the rules, you get hurt. So no one break the rules. It's quiet, but not safe by any mean."

Denton looked through the cabinet for a beer, and only found a bottle of imported stuff. It wasn't too bad. "If the church isn't there. how are they keeping the peace?"

"The police."

"I thought the church controlled the police?"

"No. They just prevent us from joining."

Denton nodded. "So we're not talking a private army here, just regular police force?"

"As far as we know. They have a FBI office and everything. as far as the government knows, nothing's wrong in the city."

"Any idea how we're going to approach them?" Fred asked.

"We'll show up at their doorstep in the morning," Denton replied, before Martin could say anything.

"Shouldn't we let them know we're coming?" Martin asked.

"This is their city. I expect they'll know the moment we land."