

## Chapter 37

"We have a problem," Colby said, pointing to the people assembled before their jet.

Denton cursed when he recognized the gray body armor the twelve people there wore. Then he saw Alice among them. He didn't have time for this. He was still trying to work out the deal with Damian working with someone else. It made no sense.

Maximilian had called their pilot to get the jet ready almost as soon as they figured out where Damian was. The only ones who stayed behind were Leroy and Yanik, so they could continue setting up the legality of his adoption.

They walked out of the airport building and crossed the tarmac, stopping before the group. They were armed, Denton could now see, Military machine guns.

The man standing before them had a different uniform. It was the same gray as the others and made of a stiffer material; that's why it took him a moment to figure out what it was. It was a bishop's frock.

"I am Bishop Samuel of..."

"Marbury," Maximilian finished. "I know who you are."

"Ah, good." The tapir said. "This will make things easier. And you are Maximilian Cormoran, Elder of the line."

"And Society Elder for Denver."

"I thought the Lewiston line was responsible for Denver."

"The Elder and the Lewiston in the city were murdered." Maximilian stated. "I would have expected you to know that. She's investigating it." He pointed to Alice.

"Ah, yes, well, there wasn't much time to talk on the way here."

"And why are you here?"

"Surely you know. You are being accused of placing one of your people within the police force, against the church's edicts."

"The accusation is false."

"Are you saying this man, Denton Brislow." He pointed to him. "Isn't one of yours?"

"It's Stenton," Denton said.

"I was under the impression you went by your adopted name," the bishop said, uncertainty in his voice.

"It is, but," He glared at Alice, "Since you people are set on treating me like a bad guy you're going to use my birth name. I don't want any of this come back to haunt my folks."

"There's no need to worry about that. This is a private matter,"

Denton snorted. "You'll forgive me if I don't believe you. Not after your people threatened my parents."

"That's enough Denton," Maximilian said. "Why are you here

Bishop. This isn't the place to resolve the situation."

"Quite. We are here, because of how things look. You stand accused of breaking the edicts; then you have your plane ready to go to Mexico. You must admit that this doesn't look good."

"This trip has nothing to do with the false accusation."

"Then why are you leaving the city, with all your people?"

"It's a private Society matter. As I said, some of our members have been murdered."

"Shouldn't this matter be left for the police to resolve?"

"We're allowed to deal with this ourselves. It's in those edicts of yours."

"And they're doing a bang up job," Frank muttered, "We're the ones who handed them the murderer."

"Shut up," Fred said.

Alice was glaring at them.

"Still, what is to say you won't decide to settle somewhere else after you've resolved your troubles there?" The bishop asked.

Maximilian sighed. "Bishop, I give you my pledge, as Elder of the Comoran Line, that we will be returning to Denver once we've taken care of this."

The tapir thought it over for a moment. "Very well."

"What?" Alice yelled. "You can't let them leave!"

"Agent Cooper, be silent. He gave his pledge."

"Who gives a fuck! They're all liars. You can't trust them!"

The bishop turned to her. "I said be silent!"

She took a step back, cowed.

The tapir looked back to Maximilian. "But should you be thinking of leaving someone behind, Elder. Let me remind you that the Church's reach is global." He gestured to his people, and they left.

Alice gave Denton a vicious look.

They watched them enter the airport before boarding the jet.

"If the church's fake, how come they're so powerful?" Denton asked, letting himself fall in a seat.

"The church is real," Maximilian said. "It's their god that's fake." Murmurs of assent went through the others.

Denton looked at the ceiling for a moment then back to the cougar. "How do you know he's fake?"

"No powers," Colby said.

"Yeah," Fred continued. "All the Gods give their followers abilities."

"That isn't entirely accurate," Maximilian said. "Ashimir doesn't give her followers anything that could be construed as power."

"What is she a God of?"

"Observation, knowledge, survival."

"so she doesn't help them survive?"

"Not that we know of." Maximilian poured himself a whiskey and sat. The jet started vibrating, and the 'buckle your seatbelt' sign came on. "The real reason we know it's fake, is that it didn't exist before the twelfth century."

"What do you mean, didn't exist before that?"

"Sometime in the middle of the twelfth century a bunch of rich folks got worried about how much influence the Factions were having on the people they ruled over. So they got together and created a book, about this god who created everything. That's another way we know it isn't real. No God controls everything. They are embodiment of specific aspects of the world, not all of it."

"Then how come they have all those things, like the scroll the bible came from, and the blanket Jesus was covered with with he was dead."

"They're fabrications. Created to support what they claim. There's a reason everything needs to be taken on faith with them, nothing can be proven."

"I still say the real proof is they don't have any powers," Fred said.

"That's why they push science so hard."

"Wait, what?" Denton straightened. "Since when has Christianity been pro-science?"

"Since always. Why do you think science advanced so fast after they were fully established."

"Okay, no. I'm sorry, but no. I'm not religious, but even I've heard all the bullshit they've said against science. Hell, during the famine of 2028, they said it was god's judgment on us. They went so far as to burn those drought resistant crops that were created to fight that."

"Dent, what you need to understand," Maximilian said, "is that at this point, there's basically two churches. There's the 'public' one, the one pushing the lie. God's balls by now everyone involved in that probably believe it's the truth. Their job was to make sure no one would look for one of the Factions for help. Then there's the gray church. I'm guessing you can guess why we call them that. They are in charge of making sure we stick to the edicts, and take action if we break them. They are the ones who've been pushing science forward, in an attempt to find something to use against us."

Denton thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. "This is fucked up. How about the other organized religions? Hinduism, Buddhism... can't actually think of more."

"Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion. As for Hinduism,

it's a bit more complicated. they worship multiple gods, each of whom are based on part of the Old Ones, so I guess that makes it real, but they don't reach the actual Gods."

"Then how can I know which ones are real and which aren't?"

"Look to the old legends. Behind most of them is one of the Factions."

"We're responsible for the one about vampires," Martin said.

"Werewolves and more animal shapeshifter legend are because of Baterilamir's followers."

"Okay, you don't need to go through all of them." Denton rubbed his temples.

"You don't have to worry about the other Factions. We don't have much to do with them. We mostly stick to our own."

Denton nodded. "Is it possible to change faction?"

"What do you mean."

"Could I decide to go follow Bater... whatever the rest of it is."

"Why would you want to?"

"What if I'm unhappy here?"

"Are you?"

"No, no. It's just hypothetical, well, maybe. I'm trying to figure out Damian. Martin, how well do you feel the Orrs play with others?"

Martin had lowered his bottle when Denton addressed him, which based on the look he had was a good thing. He might have choked on his beer otherwise. "They don't." He finally said. "They rule over them."

"Exactly, and from the little I've dealt with Damian, I get the feeling he's the same. He has his lackeys, and he did something to them to give them power, so he can control them. If it's someone else who did that, then Damian isn't the one in control."

"You said his body's trapped. maybe he doesn't have a choice." Bruce offered.

"Except the thread linked Carmichael to Damian, not someone else. That would imply he's the one who did it. That why I'm wondering if he might not have gotten this ability from another God."

Everyone was shocked at this.

"Well," Maximilian said after a long silence. "I've never heard of anyone switching Faction, but as Martin said, we don't really interact with the other Factions. So I can't say it's impossible. What I can say is that no one can join the Society. for someone else to gain abilities from our God, they would have to do to Him directly. I can't see any of the other Gods making it easier."

The Seatbelt sign went off.

"But it's going to be something to keep in mind."

Maximilian stood and took off his shirt. "It's going to be a long flight. I want everyone having sex and sleeping. We need to be in top form since we can't know what we'll be facing."

cheers went up, and clothes fell off.