

I pull the hood tighter over my face. I've stopped caring about its stink. I've heard the expression 'hungry looks' often. I even thought I knew what it meant. Oh, how wrong I was.

The looks the people give us go beyond hungry and well into famished.

Our little group is now so tight we're bumping against each other and not one of us complains.

The people look no better than the buildings. Thin; about to break. Although, instead of it being about falling down; with them, it's more like they look about to snap. And by the screams, distant and not, some already have.

I want to ask how anyone can live like this, but I'm terrified that any sound will make one of them attack. How anyone can allow others to live like this. This is beyond inhuman. Even the humans look at us like they're barely animals, and some of the non-humans... I've fought monsters with less demented expressions.

When one of them lunges in our direction, Brandon reacts without hesitation and with more brutality than I think he should. He grabs the man by the neck, slams him down, punches him, then raises him to show the damage before tossing him away.

There's defiance when he looks at me. He is clearly not sorry for what he did. And as much as I want to question the need, it clears the street for a few blocks so... it worked? The man crawls away, so at least Brandon didn't kill him. Not that I think the Detroit's authorities would care.

Brandon clearly knows where he's going, as he has us make turns on smaller and larger roads. We walk by what looks like a market, but I go out of my way not to look at what's being sold; or who. I definitely saw people tied to posts.

I swallow the bile, hard.

The quality of the buildings has improved slightly by the time I realize shadows stretch long. And by improved, I mean the lumber doesn't look quite as rotted; the buildings support a second floor, not that I understand how, and the look the people in the doorways give us is down to hunger, although the kind of hunger some of them have is made evident when a woman opens her rags of a shirt and fondles her breasts for us. Or a man lowers his pant to show—

Okay, I really didn't need to see that. No matter how big it looked. The things on it can't be healthy.

"Brandon?" Helen asks, sounding as worried as I feel. "How far are we from that club?"

"Too far to reach it before full dark."

"Tell me you are not planning on having us sleep out here."

"No."

The lack of sniping from either of them is a good indication of how bad the situation is.

"So, what is your plan?"

"I know someone a block over. We can spend the night there."

"There's actually someone we can trust?" Her disbelief echoes mine.

Brandon's snort doesn't help. "He's too afraid of me to try anything."

The...house he finally steps up to is no better than the others. The only good thing I

can say about it is that the second floor has already caved in. One thing we don't have to worry about.

He bangs on the door once and the door creaks inward. He curses.

"That isn't good, is it?" Silver asks. "Is this a good situation to get training boosts? Because I am terrified right now."

"Don't," Brandon says. "Dennis, you're with me. Helen, you keep watch." He locks eyes with her. "Don't use magic. That is among the worse thing you can do in this part of Detroit."

"Afraid I'll burn it all down?" There is no snark in her reply.

"This place could use being burned down. But a show of magic is the one thing that can get everyone here to band together to kill the magician. We don't need that complication tonight."

"I don't think it's something we need ever," I comment, joining him by the door.

"Tonight, less than the rest of the time." He steps in and I follow him. He takes out his light and shines it about.

The entry hallway is empty and smells bad. I mean, worse than the hood I'm wearing. We step by a room on the left with a bench containing alchemical equipment.

"The guy who lives here is an alchemist?"

"Of a sort." After that, on the right is a bedroom. Well, a place where someone sleeps, by the cot partially visible behind stacked crates.

"I take it he's paranoid?"

"It isn't paranoia when they are actually after you. Walter had a lot of enemies."

"Had?"

"The door wouldn't have opened if he was here, and nothing would make him leave his house. He'd have to be carried. And he would rather die than let that happen."

"Maybe they subdued him. If we find out where he is, we can—"

Brandon's expression is pissed, and I step back.

He takes a breath. "Dennis. I'm serious. You have to stop. I get that you're a good kid. I get that you want to help everyone that needs it. But, especially in this city, that is going to get you killed. Detroit preys on idealistic kids just like you. Those who set forth to right every wrong they've heard about. Detroit eats them up and doesn't even spit out the bones."

"I'm not out to right wrongs," I tell him.

"No. You're worse. Them I'm pretty sure I could reason with. You want to save people." He walks again. "And there is no saving Walter. When I said he'd rather die than be taken out of here, I wasn't kidding. And he had enough alchemical knowledge to make sure it killed him."

The next room on the left is where the worse of the smell comes from. At first I think it's from the rotting meat hanging from the ceiling, or whatever the things in bowls on the counter used to be. Then Brandon pulls the table away and crouches next to a trapdoor.

That is where the smell comes from.

He moves the padlock with a knife and curses.

"What is it?"

"The access to the cellar."

"Do we need to get down there?"

“Most definitely not. But without Walter around, I have no idea when’s the last time he secured the padlock.”

“Okay, then what is in there?”

“No idea.”

I sigh. “Brandon. Actual responses are good in this situation. You can go back to cryptic when I don’t feel like an entire city’s about to fall on me.”

“I don’t know what’s down there, or that there is anything down there at the moment. Back in the early days of the system, something dug tunnels under this side of Detroit and things come out every so often to...eat. It’s the reason this place is a mess.”

“I take it trying to kill those things didn’t work?”

“Killing them always works. But they have to be out already, which means people have died by then. And before you ask. Yes, they sent people in the tunnels to exterminate whatever make them.”

“I take it they never came back.”

He smiles. “Got it. One of those tunnels opens into this cellar. So Walter set up the trapdoor to keep them from coming out.”

“They can’t burst through things like that?”

“Can’t or won’t. No idea. Although, in this case, because there’s alchemy involved, it’s a can’t. The problem is that alchemy needs to be refreshed. The last time I saw Walter was three years ago. On my way to Toronto. I don’t remember if he told me how often he needed to refresh it. It’s still holding, so I’m guessing it’s fine. No idea when it’s going to fail. But it’s not like we have a choice.”

“You know that in movies, that’s exactly the situation where something like this fails and we’ll have to deal with an invasion from underground.”

“You’ve seen movies?”

“Base has a collection of them.”

“When this is over, how about you have him show me...” he shakes his head.

“Hopefully, we aren’t in that kind of story. Let’s get the others and set up for the night.”

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I don’t sleep well. I have the ‘improper sleep’ debuff to prove it.

It’s not only that I had to take a turn at watch. Which consisted of watching the trapdoor, but I kept waking up, certain I’d heard it smash open. The only one of us who doesn’t look half asleep as we set out is Brandon.

The long morning shadows hide a lot of the nastiness I saw yesterday, and I’m happy for it. I don’t look forward to seeing that in all its ‘splendor’. By the time there’s enough light to make out details, the buildings have improved again. While it’s nothing like the bad part of Toronto I saw, it’s a marked improvement over the rest of this place. I can see effort put into making the buildings look decent.

The smell also improves and, a block later, I know why, as we reach the waterfront. The road almost looks proper as it follows it. The buildings on the other side of the water look so different, I have trouble believing it. The brick work’s good, even at this distance. Further back, some buildings do up four or five stories. And much further there is a tower that goes much higher.

Compared to those, this side still feels drab.

When Brandon slows, I make out a line of people.

“We so fucking don’t have the time for that.” He looks toward the sun.

“What is it?”

“That’s going to be the line to get in the tunnel across the river. I was really hoping no one was controlling it today.”

“So, the guards are...it’s not the city guards,” I finish at the roll of his eyes.

“If we’re lucky, it’s one of the gangs.”

“You call that lucky?” Helen asks.

“The alternative is that it’s the construction guild. Because they maintain the tunnel and bridge, every so often, one of them gets it in their head they should get something for the work they put in and start demanding ‘tributes’ from anyone looking to cross the river.”

“I take it that’s the bridge over there?” I point to the hazy form in the distance. “It doesn’t look much further.”

“Except that’s firmly in the guild’s control, since that’s how the caravans get in. Those have the good money. It’s why they’re okay letting whoever can wrestle control of the entrance here deal with it.”

“If you haven’t suggested ferries...”

“Death traps. Once you’re on one of them, they can demand whatever they want, or else.”

“I think we can deal with anything someone like that would try,” Helen says.

“Sure. Until they realize it’s a lost cause and sink the ferry and then we have to deal with what’s in the water. You don’t want to deal with those.”

“So, there aren’t any alternatives?” I ask. “We can’t go further still and have the land reconnect?”

Brandon shakes his head. “It’s what gives these people so much power. The bridge, the tunnel and the ferries are the only way into the good part of Detroit.”

“So, it’s get in line,” Silver says, a smile forming. “Or nothing at all?”

“Yeah, and we are going to be there for days.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.” Her case is in her hands. “I happen to be quite good with crowds.”

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Against my expectations, she doesn’t start playing, wrapping us in an illusion or something like that. Her violin is still in its case when we get in line, and she starts talking with the group before us. They’re reticent, at first, but she draws them in as we move forward a bit. As far as I can tell, she talks about nothing much. About the weather, the city, them. But she does it with the enthusiasm of meeting friends she hasn’t seen in years. The one thing she never brings up is her music.

At least until one of them asks about the case in her hand.

I can not believe how demure she is. It’s like she’s ashamed of her playing; with her ‘No, I can’t. No, you don’t want to hear me play. I’m sure you’ve listened to better.’ I can’t believe how hard she makes it for them to finally convince her to take her violin out and play.

And play she does. A lively tune that has a few people dancing, clapping and laughing. When she stops, she refuses any payment. Their joy is enough, she tells them.

Brandon is definitely not pleased.

And then, someone further ahead calls to her. Motions for her to join them. She refuses. She can't get ahead of all these people.

And the people she just entertained insist she goes. They fucking part to let us through. And then she's playing again. When she stops, we get a nearly identical result. And we move ahead again. And again. And again.

It's barely past noon when the entrance to the tunnel is in view.

Then we're among the first groups, Silver playing. I can tell she's tired. Her hair is stringy with sweat, but she isn't slowing. And the people guarding the entrance are gathering.

"Hey, bard," one of them calls when she stops. "Come here."

The attitude shifts as we follow her, but once she assures them we are with her, they are friendly again.

"The guild," Brandon mutters unhappily under his breath. I think it might be good that it's them. I don't see gangs being willing to hold to any bargain Silver might make.

"Here's the deal," she tells us when she returns. "They want a show, which I can give them, but it's going to be a couple of hours, because they're getting everyone that's working to attend. I got us food while we wait." That gets Brandon to shut his mouth. "And a place to sit out of the sun. They promised that as soon as I'm done, we go in and that we'll be on the other side without trouble, short of them also wanting a show, but that's not something they can control."

"Unless they send word," Helen says, "with ensures you need to perform and delays us further."

"Except she already put us well ahead of when I thought we'd get here," Brandon says, with some awe and Silver straightens. "There are a bunch of safe place to rest—well, safe for Detroit's anyway—on the other side, so when we get there isn't as important anymore. And if we get the go ahead of the people here, that means we shouldn't have anyone bothering us along the way."

"Short of demanding I play, I expect."

"Possibly, but those left will be working, and I don't see them getting away with stopping for long."

"So, I play while we cross and everyone's happy?"

"And the other side has no doubt a bard's coming," Helen says, still not particularly happy.

"Are we in a position to refuse?" I ask.

"I don't think so," Silver replies. "They were polite and all that, but my instincts tell me we don't want to cross them."

"So, is there a point in discussing it further?" I ask Helen.

"At least I get to sit down for a while. I am so tired of being on my feet."

"Hey, you could have stayed home where your—" Brandon looks at me as I shake my hand from the punch to his shoulder.

"You were doing really well being a good brother," I tell him. "Don't ruin it now."

He smirks and turns to Silver. "Where's the food?"