

# **NEON STONEHENGE**

## ***Book One of The Druid Gunslinger Legends***

*A Blake Conrad tale*

### **Chapter One – “There Is No Beginning”**

I'd fallen out a window and was somewhere between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> floors when I realized that this latest case I was mixed up in might very well be the death of me. At least I wasn't the only person falling out of this window, I thought to myself, just before the guy who'd tackled me and sent us both crashing downwards transformed into a fucking bat and started flying away.

Life had a way of always kicking me in the teeth.

But let's wind the clock the back a few weeks, and start the story somewhere closer to the beginning, or what feels like a beginning. My name's Dale Sexton, the last in a long line of druid troubleshooters. The Sexton line is full of us, all of us druids, usually soldiers, sometimes spies, sometime law officers, and, in my case, a private detective. It hadn't been what I'd set out to do, but after I washed out from the army, I'd inherited a vineyard and a winery up in the Napa Valley, which became my main source of income, as well as what I used to cover my nighttime job as an investigator for hire who specialized in the odd and strange.

If you were just worried that your spouse was cheating on you, I wasn't the one to be calling. There were people much cheaper and far better suited for that sort of task. Now say, if you were worried that your spouse was cheating on you because she sold her soul to the Devil and nefarious forces were causing her to prostitute herself out to pay off some of that debt, well, then I might just be the sort of specialized help you could find yourself in need of.

My dad, Lane Sexton, had used the winery to cover up his activities as well, but he'd also been much more of a hunter than I was, traveling around, working to catch and kill as many monsters as he could, to keep people safe, without them ever knowing he existed. I loved my dad. I mostly loved my dad. He was a hard ass, but I guess he had to be. But he's gone now, and the winery is in my and my sister's name, although I don't spend most of my time up there. She's much more the traditional hunter archetype than I am, so naturally Charlotte prefers to keep her workspace there, whereas I keep my personal office in a very old building in downtown San Francisco overlooking the bay, the one my father used to use as his in-town base of operations as well. The downstairs part of the two-story office houses part of the winery business, handling all the shipping and accounting, and the upstairs part that looked out towards the Bay was my office, armory, apartment and workspace. When I'd first inherited everything, I was worried about living in what used to be my dad's home-away-from-home, but with rent prices being what they are in the city, not to mention the incredible view, I was happy enough to spend most of my time here these days. I can spend hours watching the fog roll in and out across the water, clouds of vapor slowly engulfing the cities across the Bay in shadows of feather and light.

I love that view more than anything.

I was looking out at it when there was a knock at my office door, one of those classic wooden ones with a heavy frosted glass window with my name and profession stenciled on the exterior of it. DALE SEXTON, UNCONVENTIONAL INVESTIGATIONS. The knock's a little uncommon, because

usually I'm told in advance by my secretary when there are appointments, but she'd been on maternity leave for the last month, so I suppose whoever it was had just wandered right up to see me. Topaz, who managed the front desk downstairs, probably hadn't even noticed that Ruby was out on leave. 1<sup>st</sup> floor preferred to pretend that the second floor didn't really exist unless they needed something.

"C'mon in," I said to the door, which opened immediately. A rather mousy looking flat-footed man strolled into my office wearing a cheap suit that looked very old and very well cared for, as if it was all the guy had in the world, and he had been doing his best to keep it hanging on by a lifeline. Despite looking like a stiff breeze would knock him over, there was a sense about his presence that he hadn't always been this way, that he'd used to be the kind of guy who would knock heads if you argued with him, and maybe, just maybe, there were still flashes of who that guy was buried somewhere within the guy he was now. He also oozed cop to me, although he wasn't anybody *I* knew, and I knew my fair share of guys on the force. He was of Chinese lineage, but I'd clocked him right away as second or third generation Bay area native. He had to be in his mid-50s, but despite the sort of weary aura around him, I also knew that if push came to shove, this guy would go down hard and go down swinging. There was a fighter inside that shell; he was just exhausted and a little beaten down.

"Mr. Sexton?" the man asked, his voice much deeper and bassier than I'd expected it to be, like there was still a ghost of that deadly giant he'd once been rattling around inside of him. "I'm Detective Artie Gao, from the San Francisco Police Department. I was referred to you by a couple of people, including one of our coroners, Doctor Shirow. She said you're the guy people in my line of work turn to when everything has moved into the weird and well beyond the pale."

I chuckled a little bit, knowing that if Erika had sent this guy my way, at least a little bit of my homework had been done for me. Doctor Erika Shirow and I had been acquaintances for about seven years now, from when I'd first come back to San Francisco in '98 to pick up the pieces of what my father's untimely death had left behind. She, Dad and Charlotte – my younger sister, who also helped carry on the real family business – apparently had an understanding about the work we do and had known each other since the good doctor had started working for the SFPD, so I was happy to piggyback off that relationship. Doctor Shirow also helped cover up any unfortunate collateral damage that any of us Sextons left behind in our wake.

"Depends on just *how* weird things are getting, Detective Gao," I said to him as I moved to sit down at the antique desk that had been with our family for generations, gesturing for him to take a seat on the other side of it. "Are you here for professional or personal reasons?"

"Personal," the detective replied, slumping into the chair. "As a cop, I'm used to only believing what I can see and what I can prove, but recently, I've been forced to accept that maybe there's a whole other world going on that I'm just not a part of, that I'm deliberately being kept out of."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?" I asked him.

"There is no beginning to this story," Gao said to me. "Not one that I can point to, anyway. Growing up, I thought it was just elders trying to scare the kids with ghost stories and talk of family curses, but now, I'm starting to wonder if just maybe all of that had some ring of truth to it."

"Which is it?" I asked, grabbing a yellow legal pad from my desk as well as a pen, starting to scribble notes. One of the things I learned early on doing this was that once people started talking, they'd usually tell you something they hadn't meant to, but if you weren't paying attention, you could easily miss it. The first thing I did was scribble down SHIROW, so that I would remember to contact the coroner

at some point during this mess to find out what she knew that Gao might've left out. After that, I wrote down GHOST and CURSE next to each other and waited.

“My grandfather used to tell me that our family lineage was cursed, and that if we ever strayed from our own people with our love, that great doom and misfortune would befall not only the person who dared step out of line, but our entire family,” Gao sighed. “I always thought it was just Chinese grandparents wanting us to marry Chinese girls, but now... now I'm not so sure.”

I underlined CURSE and scratched out GHOST, then wrote down the client's name – ARTIE GAO, SFPD DETECTIVE. Cops generally hated coming to my family for help, because it meant admitting to a failing, that they needed some specialized knowledge they weren't going to get anywhere else. “Great doom and misfortune? Can you be a bit more specific?” I asked, writing the phrase down, simply because the way he'd said it had felt pregnant with meaning. It was fun to look at in my notes. GREAT DOOM AND MISFORTUNE. Sure, it might be nothing, but there was something ominous and specific about the phrase, so I didn't want to neglect it. Cases like this are made and broken in the details.

“Not really. My grandfather died decades ago. And, honestly, I'm not even sure it's related to what's happened now. But *maybe* it is? I wanted to treat this all just like a typical missing person case, but the more I dig down, the less comfortable I am with what I've found.” He looked up at me with sunken eyes, clearly operating on not enough sleep. “That's why I'm here, talking to you. I want you to find my missing girlfriend.”

My hand scribbled down GIRLFRIEND next on the pad. Now we were starting to get down to the nitty-gritty. “You know as well as I do, Detective Gao, that most of the time, a missing persons case is going to end one of two ways – either the missing person is intentionally missing and doesn't want to be found, or the missing person is dead,” I said, keeping my eyes on the man, trying to size him up. “Neither is an outcome likely to bring much joy.”

“If she's dead,” Gao said, anger sparking in his voice just a tiny amount before he buried it back down once more. “I want to know who did it and why, so either I can punish them, or you can. If she's intentionally missing...” He looked down at his hands, forced himself to breath in and then exhale again, then looked back up at me. “Then I just want to know why and be sure it's not my fault or something I did. If it is, I just want to be sure it's not something I can fix.”

“Alright then, let's start with the Who. You have a name and a photograph?”

He nodded and reached into his jacket, pulling out a glossy picture, tossing it down onto my desk. In it, I saw Gao, smiling and laughing, with his arm around an Irish looking woman in her late thirties or maybe early forties with her head resting on his shoulder, shock of deep red curls all over the place, and deep green eyes. She was dressed in a sporty jacket, a scarf around her neck, and a t-shirt that said San Francisco Zoo on it. The wind must've been high that day because most of her clothes and loads of her hair were diagonal with the ground, flapping towards the right. They were at Fisherman's wharf, and my guess was that the photo had been taken by a third party with one of those disposable cameras. The photo could've been developed at any of a thousand one-hour photo places around town. She looked happy, laughing with him, each of them holding onto sticks of cotton candy that looked in danger of blowing off the stick at any moment. Maybe that was what they found so funny. “Her name is Saoirse Staire. I wrote it down on the back because how the hell you get SEER-sha out of Saoirse is beyond me. We'd... we've been dating about two years now, and she moved in with me last fall when the lease at her previous place ran out.”

I took my time spelling the name correctly in my notes, copying it from the back of the photo before turning it back to look at her picture again. Good looking woman, but not the kind of over-the-top beauty that screamed out black widow or Dearg Dur. Definitely Celtic heritage, though, which could mean a dozen different *other* options, most of which weren't things I liked thinking about, but fuck it, that's the job. It also meant I was going to have to visit some people I hadn't seen in a while. Lord only knows how *those* visits were going to go. "I take it things were both serious *and* good then?"

"You think it could be one without the other?"

I smiled, desperately trying to avoid patronizing a guy who should definitely know better. "I think people get together for all sorts of reasons. If you're lucky, it's love. If you aren't, it's necessity. And if you aren't paying *attention*, it can be awfully easy to confuse one with the other."

"We're in love, Mr. Sexton," Gao said. "I promise you that. We were even talking about getting married, at least we were before she up and vanished."

"Now, let's circle back to that," I said. I scribbled RUNAWAY BRIDE? but wrote next to it UNLIKELY. I didn't have any reason to be convinced of that, but like Dad always said, you get an instinct in this business, nothing wrong with making a note of it. And this didn't feel like a disappearing fiancée case. Maybe it was something about how convinced the Detective was. "You say 'vanished,' so give me a bit more detail about what that means to you."

"She stopped showing up for work unexpectedly, she hasn't come home, she hasn't called any of her friends. It's been six days. Wherever she is, I can't find her, and I'm frightened."

"It's new tech, but you guys have been working on triangulating locations via cell phones over there at the SFPD. You try that?" I wrote down SIX DAYS MISSING on the pad.

"She'd have to *use* her cell for us to do that, and any time I've tried calling her, it just goes straight to voicemail. Wherever it is, it's off and it's been off as long as she's been missing."

I added CELL PHONE OFF to my notes. There was a slight chance I might be able to track it down via other methods, but it was always better to start with the easier stuff than running straight into the guaranteed solution with the highest price tag that might not even answer the real question being asked. Finding a phone was never a guarantee you'd find a person *with* it. "Activity on credit cards? I know you know all this stuff, Detective, but my job is to make sure you aren't getting caught up in the emotion of it and missing something obvious."

"Nothing."

I scribbled NO CREDIT CARD ACTIVITY on the pad. Most of this was just making sure he'd gone through all the shit he was supposed to, and that he hadn't been distracted by her absence into making dumb mistakes. "She normally gets around town via bus? BART? CalTrain? Cab?"

"You seen the prices cabbies are asking these days? We're not made of money, Mister Sexton. She used a combination of bus and BART, but I haven't seen her on any of her usual routes, and there's way too much CCTV footage at all the BART stations for me to watch," Gao said to me. I wrote down MUNI TRAVELER in my notes, although that didn't differentiate her much from nearly everyone else in the damn city. "There weren't any signs of foul play at the house, and *I'm* the one reporting her missing, although my colleagues are still happy to consider me a suspect, which I suppose they're professionally obligated to do."

“Any signs she just decided to leave you?” I asked him, my eyes focusing on his face, trying to spot any micro signs of emotion that he could be trying to hide. “I know it sucks, but it’s still one of those things I have to ask about.”

“She didn’t take any of her clothes, she didn’t take her toothbrush.” NO MISSING CLOTHES. “Hell, her *cat* is still at the house, and she wouldn’t leave Pumpernickel behind.”

I frowned. DIDN’T TAKE CAT. I also wrote down WHO NAMES A CAT PUMPERNICKEL? But leaving everything behind like that wasn’t good. It usually meant the absence wasn’t planned. “Which leads more towards the other thing, you know?”

“But if she’s dead, wouldn’t we have found a body?” Gao asked.

“People who jump off the Golden Gate aren’t always seen or found,” I said, cautiously testing the waters on the suicide theory.

“Forgive me, Mr. Sexton, but that’s bullshit. Saoirse wouldn’t commit suicide. She’s too... stubborn for that. It would be like admitting defeat, and that’s something she just doesn’t do.”

PROUD PERSON. “You know her better than I do, so I’ll take your word for it. You reached out to her family?”

“I don’t *know* her family,” he grumbled. “She told me when we first hooked up that they’re basically dead to her, so if I don’t know where she is, wherever they are, they definitely don’t either. I don’t have a number or even a name of who to talk to.”

NO FAMILY I wrote down next, tapping my pen beneath it before I paused to underline it. It wasn’t entirely unheard of for people moving out to California to be leaving something troubling behind. Still, everybody had *somebody* they gave a shit about back home. Maybe not a lot of people, but inevitably there was one or two people just too ingrained in a person’s life to cut out forever. Which opened another option. OR FAMILY TROUBLES? That was always another path I had to entertain – that this girl had been abducted by her family for one reason or another. I’d certainly seen weirder things in my time in this business. “And now we come to the part where you’ve got to talk to me about this supposed family curse of yours.” This, I knew, was why my name had come up. Something had crossed the line from the stuff old people used to scare children to the thing an adult man took seriously. He’d asked around the SFPD about someone who wouldn’t dismiss him right out of hand, and my name had come up. “Obviously, you aren’t just dismissing it anymore.”

“A couple of days ago, I woke up in the middle of the night, and the house was so cold, I thought maybe I’d left a window open. I could see my breath and felt myself shivering, so I picked up my gun from the nightstand and went to sweep the house and...”

“...and?” I prompted, trying to get him to say it, because I’d seen this sort of thing before, when someone was confronted with something they couldn’t understand, and suddenly they were out of their world and thrust, terrified and incomprehensibly, into mine. I also wrote down COLD HOUSE in my notes. It was a common enough supernatural marker, and could be indicative of a thousand different things, but it was the sort of detail that a lay person wouldn’t know made their story credible.

“...and I saw a giant wolf standing in my hallway, but too big to be an actual wolf, more like something you’d see in a movie, with the wolf’s head as high as my own. He had glowing red eyes and fangs that were dripping thick with saliva and maybe even blood. And he was snarling at me. I didn’t know what else to do so I pulled the trigger and...”

“And what, Gao?” I asked, jotting down DIRE WOLF on the legal pad.

“And as soon as I felt the kick from the gun going off, the wolf had disappeared, and I was simply shooting a bullet down my empty hallway into a linen closet,” Gao said. “But *I know what I saw.*”

“You find the bullet okay?” I scribbled down VAMPIRE? across the yellow paper, but also wrote down DRUID? on the other side of the line. I used the legal pad to sort of think aloud while I was working. Keeping notes was important. Dad and Grandma had both taught me that. FAE? SHAPESHIFTER? The dire wolf was another common staple among these stories – all sorts of nasty people used the form because it embodied fear for a lot of the populace. And Gao’s memory wouldn’t be sharp enough to pick out details about what *kind* of dire wolf it was.

“Embedded in a bunch of bedsheets that I paid way too much for at one point in my life,” he sighed. “That’s not the only thing, either. I started finding these little jade figurines everywhere I went. It seems like they generally disappear, but this one I found this morning.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny little jade Foo Dog, sliding it across the desk to me. “You take it. If I hold onto it, it’ll have vanished by morning.”

I took the tiny figure in my hand and started twisting it a little, holding it beneath my desk lamp to get as much visibility on the thing as I could. It was intricately carved and felt warm in my hands. There was definite magic lingering around inside of this thing, but what kind, that would take some work to get out. “You know the meaning of these?”

“They’re traditionally guardian figures in Chinese architecture,” Gao said. “My parents used to have a pair of them made of concrete outside of the front door of their house, before they moved down to southern California. When they moved, they took the shishi with them.”

“What do you mean by vanish?” I asked, writing CHINESE GUARDIAN DOG FIGURINES – JADE/CHARGED in amongst my notes.

“This is the third one of these I’ve come across. I picked each one up and put it in my pocket, but by morning the next day, my pocket is empty.”

“Could it be the same lion, just in different places?”

Gao shook his head. “Different sizes each time. Different shades as well. I think the shape doesn’t change all that much, but if you’re asking me if they’re identical, there I cannot answer you, Mr. Sexton.”

I wrote DISAPPEARING beneath the note about the figurines. “Anything else I should know about?”

“You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Detective Gao. You are already way beyond the point of no return when it comes to Weirdsville, and I promise you, I am not going to judge you one way or another.”

The man looked out my window, maybe envying my view, to which I couldn’t blame him, then looked back at me. “I think I saw a fucking unicorn up in Pioneer Park this morning. I’m *certain* I saw one. Does... does that mean something specific to you? I was told that it might.”

I sighed a little bit. “In Pioneer Park? You’re sure that’s where you were?”

“I *know* where I was, Mr. Sexton,” Gao said to me. “And I think you’re missing the forest for the trees here. It was a fucking *unicorn*.”

“Yeah,” I said, shaking my head. SEYMOUR I scribbled down next. The unicorn in question and I were acquainted. “Yeah, no, I definitely got that. Okay, Mr. Gao, I’ll take your case. My rate is \$250 per day with a minimum of one week’s work guaranteed, not including additional expenses, although if I do not deliver a result, or at the very least demonstrably solid progress, within a month’s time, I’ll refund half of my entire fee back to you, so you don’t feel like you’re pouring money into an endless money pit. That said, I also can’t have you following me around while I work, so while I’m happy to provide updates every few days, I mostly just need you to stay out of my hair and let me work, okay?”

“How confid—”

“I’m never confident about *anything*, Detective Gao, which why I generally get solid results. Now, I’ve got a questionnaire I need you to fill in with everything you know about Saoirse – where she worked, where she lived before she moved in with you, a list of any known friends and acquaintances – and I also need you to bring something to the office that she handled all the time. Hairbrush would be best, toothbrush is okay, nothing living or that a lot of *other* people touch regularly.”

“What’s that for?”

“Detective. You have your methods, I have mine. You’ll get it back in the end. See, you’re already peeking a little bit behind the veil, and the last thing you want is a deeper look at what’s back here. Since you were referred to me, you know what my reputation is, and you know I don’t fuck about. I’m going to get shit done, and I’m probably going to have to kick over a few hornet nests to do it, but lemme worry about the consequences for that. All you need to do is make sure people aren’t getting in my way when I’m trying to work. Who told you to check out Pioneer Park? Dr. Shirow? Or someone else? You said *a couple* of people referred you over to me – who’s the other one?”

“Guy who said he’d worked with you a few times before. Detective James Quintrell-Turner. Been on the force for ages. He said if I went up to Pioneer Park and saw something unusual, then came back and told him about it, he’d give me someone who might be able to help. That’s how your name came up.”

I scribbled in large, angry letters JQT before writing OBVIOUSLY beneath it in slightly less angry text. It was true, Jimmy and I had worked a number of cases together, and while there was no way I would be inviting him over for a barbeque, he was smart enough to know how to sort the punters from the real cases. Jimmy had something of a disdain for my world, simply because he knew there were too many rules for him to follow and understand, and he was a simple cop who liked simple cases – the husband shot his wife because she was cheating on him, the lady stole the jewels and killed the guard when he caught her breaking into the safe. Nice, easy shit like that. The first time he’d needed my help involved a necromancer and the use of zombies as murder weapons. All of that resulted in a case he couldn’t prosecute, but he and I had made sure the necromancer in question wasn’t going to be causing problems moving forward. So don’t think that I don’t *like* Jimmy, he can just tend to be a weight slowing me down, and he has a strong dislike of getting blood on his hands, whereas I’m rarely afforded that luxury.

The one true advantage of my work is that the bodies I would leave in my wake generally clean up after themselves. If they don’t, well, we’ve got spells for that. And the coroner, Dr. Shirow, gives me a warning whenever she comes across one of those in their systems. The last thing I want is the modern world getting caught up in the sort of shit I deal with on a regular basis.

I'd sort of hoped that Detective Gao might have heard of me from somebody else working on the force, Officer Winnick or Captain Windsor, who might've softened the blow about what to expect in working with me, but I'd just have to stomach that this case came indirectly from JQT, which also meant he'd be butting his nose into it every chance he got. It meant someone doublechecking my work, which wasn't the worst, but I hated having people looking over my shoulder, and QT could be a smug one sometimes. It wasn't that he reveled in my misfortune; he just took great delight in seeing that I didn't always know what I was doing *either*.

"Alright, well, I'm going to come by your house and do a sweep there in the next few days. If you can give me a key and let me know when you're not going to be home, that'll make things easier. The less of my world you see the better. Once you bring me the personal item, I'll start running down a few options and we can see what turns up. The Bay Area is a huge place, and when you're dealing with things on this side of the veil, it can be easy for tourists to get lost or caught up somewhere in the mess."

"Tourists?"

I pursed my lips for a second, trying to decide the best way to tell him this that would run into the least resistance. "The supernatural world, Detective Gao, isn't the sort of thing you can just dip a toe into. Lots of people have tried to get a peek behind the veil and then go back to living normal lives again, but once you see what's over there, it can be remarkably hard to shake loose the hold it has on you. The woman I bring back to you may not be entirely the same woman who left you. That's completely beyond my control. You've gotten just a tiny taste of it these past few days, so you can probably walk away from all this now, if you're lucky. If you stop looking for her, I imagine all the weirdness will disappear quick enough. Now, I'm not saying you *should* stop looking for her, but I'm obligated to give you the option. If you want it."

"Have you ever been in love, Mr. Sexton?"

There was a much, *much* longer answer to that question, but I decided to keep it short and on-point. "Not reliably, sir, no."

"Well, let me tell you, when you are, you will stop at nothing to protect the one you love. If that means I must deal with giant wolves in my house, I consider that a very low price to pay," the older Chinese man said to me.

"Fair enough," I told him. "I've given you my warning and you've given me your reply. If you could get the two grand upfront to me at some point over the next few days, I'd appreciate it. Same for the personal item. Best if you bring them together, actually. You can just drop them and your house key off with Topaz, the receptionist down in the lobby."

"If you don't mind me saying so, Mr. Sexton, she smells like a stripper."

"That's because she *is also* a stripper, Detective Gao, but it's not my place to judge how people make their dollars as long as the work gets done," I said to him. "Go home, Detective Gao, and let me get to work on this." I held up the photograph, shaking it in his direction. "I'll get answers, I promise you."

The detective excused himself from my office, as I set the photograph back down on top of my desk. I pulled the yellow legal pad closer and scribbled PLAN OF ATTACK on it, underlining it before giving myself a handful of options. SEYMOUR. LAYLA. BARNABY. DIGGER. THE CAPTAIN. THE BIRDMAN. SHIV. Lots of possible places to kick off. I scribbled down LAST RESORT to the right of THE CAPTAIN, and after looking at for a good long while, I wrote a 1 next to SEYMOUR, and circled it,



followed by a 2 next to SHIV, circling that as well. No need to start rattling big trees when little trees would do just as well.

I also scribbled down CALL CHARLOTTE before putting a 3 next to it, circling that. She wouldn't have any useful information about any of this mess, but she always liked to know when I was on a case. That way if I suddenly found myself up to my neck in shit I couldn't manage, she could come and bail me out. A more prideful man would take shame in that, but my sister was one of the deadliest hunters the Sexton clan had ever produced, so I was perfectly fine accepting her help when it was offered. There weren't many people alive or dead I'd be scared to face down in a duel, but she was definitely one of them. That said, Charlotte could also sometimes be as subtle as a sledgehammer through a curio shop front window, so getting a little bit of the work under my belt done first wouldn't hurt anything.

My eyes turned to glance out the window once more, seeing the fog had rolled in even thicker, as the setting sun was casting far less light into the space. Time to get back to work, I thought to myself. That meant it was time to get suited up.

I opened the largest drawer of my desk, taking out the massive oaken case, setting it atop the yellow pad. I placed my thumbs into the grooves on either side of the top of the box and heard the telltale whirring from the insides of it as the internal mechanisms shifted from locked to an open state. I lifted the top off and pulled out the gunbelt, sliding it around my waist, before taking the first of my custom Colt M1878s from its place, opening the cylinder, loading in some of our custom made bullets into the chambers one at a time before snapping it shut, sliding the gun into the holster on my left hip, repeating the process with the other one, sliding it into the holster on my right hip. I closed the box back up and put it back into my desk drawer, closing it shut. I brought my fingertips across the belt buckle just below my belly and felt the enchantment take grip once more, hiding the weapons from anyone who couldn't see behind the veil. You can't just go walking around San Francisco with a couple of six-shooters on your hips without people staring unless you know how to hide them. This is 2005, not 1905. The concealment enchantment was one of the very first things Dad taught me in the early days, so I'd had lots of practice with it. It was like slipping on the most comfortable pair of pants you'd ever owned.

After a glance down at my yellow pad, I picked up the photograph and put it into my satchel, then tapped the first stop on my tour through the dark side of the veil. I had to go see a unicorn about a man.

## Chapter Two – “Goddamn Apples”

It wasn't the first time I'd found myself in the checkout line of a Safeway a few hours after sunset with a bag of apples, a package of carrots and a bag of sugar cubes, and I was quite certain it wouldn't be the last time either, despite the shady looks the art school dropout student behind the checkout counter was giving me.

“Problem?” I asked her, as she pushed her undercut flop of slime green hair off to one side of her face, trying to keep my expression as politely neutral as I could. She was dressed in jean cutoff overalls and a long-sleeved flannel shirt beneath. She also had a tattoo of a woman in Mexican Day of the Dead makeup on her neck, which put a face beneath her main face. Neither one looked all that friendly.

“Wanted to get some healthy snacks but decided, ‘Fuck it, I might just need to mainline some sugar right away if these veggies don't do the trick’?” she asked me sardonically.

“That's cute, but no,” I shot back. “Gotta go see an old friend, who doesn't like me looking after his health, even if I'm doing him a favor. The sugar cubes are for the tea we're going to have while I'm visiting,” I lied. Seymour fucking *hated* tea. I'd tried bringing them some at one point, and they'd threatened to kick me in the chest. *Again*.

“Uh huh. \$23.75.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a twenty and a five, sliding it across the counter to her. “Keep the change.”

She looked at me as though I'd spoken to her in 12<sup>th</sup> century Italian about the sins of the common citizen, but when the sentence finally sunk through her overly stoned brain, she frowned at me, like my generosity had offended her. “And do *what* with it? Buy a can of soda?” She held out the paper bag to me, which I rolled up the top of and then stuck under my arm.

“Buy a better education,” I muttered to myself as I made my way out of the twenty-four-hour grocery store and into the city that was mostly just empty air that time of night.

The thing about San Francisco is that past a certain hour, the streets are basically urban graveyards. Sure, you'll spot the occasional car driving along, but for the most part, from say two until just a few minutes before five in the morning, the city feels like a ghost town. Which is just how I like it.

Especially if I know I'm going to have to yell.

I knew I was going to have to yell.

If you've never been to Pioneer Park after dark, well, congrats on being a noble and upstanding citizen who's always respected that sign that says, “park closed after dark.” Following rules is how my family got into this trepidatious line of work in the first place, so we've given up that practice centuries ago. Rules are there to keep those safe who aren't prepared to go off exploring on their own.

It's a hell of an uphill walk, and in spite of the fact that I work within the borders of San Francisco, I fucking *hate* walking up hills. But at least this late at night (or is it early in the morning? I can never tell), I didn't have to contend with tourists trying to be cute, taking pictures of Coit Tower, or of the admittedly amazing view.

When you could see it anyway, which wasn't tonight.

The fog had come in something fierce on this particular evening, which was the perfect accompaniment to my mood. Normally I have a certain sense of relentless excitement that goes along with a new case, but anytime Pioneer Park has to be my first stop in investigating that case, my spirits are a little dampened.

Allow me a slight detour in advance of what's to come, in which you permit me to dispel a few common myths about unicorns. First and foremost, anybody can fucking see them, okay? That whole 'can only be spotted by virgin eyes' is just a practical joke that a unicorn played on a human about a thousand years ago that the unicorns are perfectly content to keep on spreading for their own entertainment. They do have access to the Veil, however, which lets them generally conceal their presence any time they want to, or to appear as a normal horse, by concealing their horn and reducing their general size.

The bits about them being able to cure sickness, nullify poisons and purify sources of water? Those parts are actually true, and they're the reason people have been hunting unicorns for centuries.

The bits about them being noble and pure of heart? Yeah, *that's* the biggest load of *shit*.

With the fog obscuring the view, I hadn't been able to tell that the rain meteorologists had told us was going to bypass the city had, instead, decided to say 'fuck it, let's go spit onto San Francisco in the middle of the night.' That meant I was getting a smattering of unpleasant rain squirting down onto me from the pendulous clouds that covered me from foot to sky.

I'd had to walk all the way up Telegraph Hill Blvd, and even when the weather's good, that's not a great walk to do, but in the goddamn rain? It's annoying as all hell. By the time I'd gotten to the empty little circular parking lot, the bag underneath my arm was starting to lose cohesiveness, and my patience was starting to dwindle along with it.

"Alright, Seymour," I shouted into the dark fog. "You knew when you saw that Detective that he was going to come to *me*, and that meant *I* was going to come to *you*, so here I am! Can we just get the fuck on with it already, or you want to make me sit out here in the fucking rain some more?"

"I like watching you suffer a bit," came back the reply, the voice an odd combination of feminine and masculine tones, as Seymour trotted out from the trees alongside Coit Tower, the fog only obscuring their presence for so long. "You're often a bit of a prick to me, you know?"

Seymour had been the Unicorn of Pioneer Park since at least the 1960s, but hell, if someone had told me they'd been around since the park was established in 1876, I'd probably have believed it. I don't know the actual lifespan of a unicorn – I don't think anybody does, because unicorns can often be notorious liars when it comes to talking about themselves. When it comes to talking about themselves, they will exaggerate in ways that you haven't even begun to imagine. Were they all to be believed, then every unicorn in existence not only *knew* Merlin, but they were close personal friends of the world's most significant Magus.

What you're probably imagining for Seymour's form probably isn't too far off. A too-large white horse with a rainbow-colored mane that shimmered with what looked almost like gold sparkle, and a long tail, multicolored to match. Giant blue eyes that looked like they could see into the very depths where you kept your innermost secrets. Hooves of black onyx that somehow moved almost imperceptibly in the San Francisco nights but were also capable of raising a loud ruckus whenever wanting to make an impressive entrance. And, of course, the trademark corkscrew spiral horn atop their head, shimmering and gold, about the length of a man's arm, sharpened into a point that had proven deadly on more than one occasion, when push had come to shove.

Seymour had both sets of genitals, male and female, and as such, had settled on them/they for pronouns, something I'd been happy to respect, even if it'd taken me a little bit of time to get used to. There were rumors that Seymour had become something of a cultural icon to the LGBT community here in San Francisco, with their likeness starting to appear with that movement in the seventies, but there was also a decent enough chance that Seymour had simply been able to capitalize on a lucky coincidence. They'd always been smug to me, even when I'd been barely more than a child, taking his first steps with magic. After a bit of a rocky start, I'd taken over being the Sexton family liaison with Seymour, and we entrusted them to act as a sort of magical screening service for us.

Yeah, me and this particular unicorn had a long and sordid history.

"The Detective," I said to Seymour. "You made sure he'd see you so that I'd know there was an actual case here, one that needed my skills and wouldn't be up to snuff for the SFPD."

"Course I did," Seymour said, trotting ever closer towards me. They had a voice that was neither high nor low in terms of pitch, a sort of flat, androgynous tone without much in the way of inflection or accent, although Seymour had definitely been picking up local slang lately, which was part of the reason my sister had nominated me to take over the liaison position – she couldn't be bothered. "That's the agreement we have, me and your family. I screen out the fruitcakes who are just seeing things from too many bad mushroom trips, and your family brings tribute. Speaking of which? Where is it? You know I don't like giving away anything for free, so I demand my tribute."

"I know the rules as well as you do," I said. I reached into the bag and pulled out one of the apples, tossing it over towards the massive mythological creature, who caught it in their mouth and snarfed it down before turning to look over at me with annoyance.

"Goddamn apples?" The unicorn whinnied at me, shaking their head disparagingly. "You'd best have the good shit in there too, Sexton, otherwise this conversation's going to go poorly for both of us."

"It's in here too, but you need to look after your figure, Seymour," I teased. "You've put on a few pounds since I've been up here last, and it's starting to make you look... pudgy."

The unicorn neighed at me, shaking their lustrous locks. "You take that back right now, or I'm not saying another word."

"There's sugar cubes in here, Seymour, so don't make threats you can't back up."

The unicorn reared up, trying to put their most impressive threatening pose on display, but this sort of preening display was old hat to me, and I wasn't buying it, so Seymour put their front legs back down and shook their head. "You've gotten mean as you've gotten older, Dale. Where's that wide-eyed little boy who used to look upon me with such reverence?"

"You kicked him in the chest once for moving too quickly behind you."

"Are you *still* mad about that?" Seymour bemoaned, looking away from me, almost an admission of how it wasn't one of their finer moments. "Let it *go*, Dale. It was a long time ago."

"I think I'm gonna keep being mad about it a bit longer, if it's all the same to you. Apples and carrots to start," I said. "You convince me you've got details worth the sugar cubes, I'll happily break those out as well." I pulled out a carrot and extended it to the gargantuan unicorn, who pulled it from my hand and chomped it down eagerly. Never understood why they thought carrots were a step *up* from apples, but that was Seymour's hierarchy.

“You want the good news, the bad news or the strange news first?” Seymour asked me before nudging me with their nose, encouraging me to fish out another apple to hand off. Even the bottom of the offering totem pole was better than what they could scrounge out in the city on a daily basis.

That was a *much* more complicated opening than I’d anticipated. The unicorn was known to stick to small details and not volunteer long leads like that, so maybe there was more going on here than I’d originally anticipated. “Let’s start with the bad news and just get it over and done with.”

Seymour nodded twice. “Your Detective’s got the stink of leannán sídhe all over him, although it was good he came to see me when he did, because it was starting to fade a little bit. Too much longer and I might’ve had trouble picking it up off him. And I imagine that’s why he came to you, trying to find her, yeah? The woman he’s got you looking for, she’s faefolk through and through, so I can imagine you’re going to want to schedule a visit to Layla.”

“I never *want* to see Layla, Seymour,” I sighed. “It just keeps happening, against my will, usually.”

“Are you *sure* the two of you never hooked up?” Seymour asked. “I’m usually a good judge of character when it comes to these sorts of things and I could *swear* that—”

“Never happened, saddle brain, so stop thinking about it.”

“But I’ll bet you’ve thought about it,” they joked. “I know she has. She’s made mention of it in passing when she’s been up to visit.”

“Why the hell would she share something like that with someone like you?”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and all that,” Seymour said. “Life’s lonely at the top of the food chain, and you know anyone who you think could successfully challenge that woman at anything?”

“No, that’s a fair assessment of her,” I admitted.

“Anyway, faefolk. Leannán sídhe, and all the complications that that brings. Surely that information’s got to be worth my first sugar cube, don’t you think?” Seymour said, nudging my shoulder with the end of their nose. “Huh? Huh?”

“Fine,” I said. I reached into the bag and tore open the package of sugar cubes, unwrapping one before placing it on the center of my palm so Seymour could lick it up.

“Oh yeah,” the unicorn said like a junkie getting a long-awaited hit of their favorite drug. “That’s the good shit right there. See? You can be rather nice when you’re not being a jackass.”

“I could say the same about you,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’d wondered if she was a sídhe, based on her name, but it’s good to get confirmation of that in advance. They’ve been rare in meddling with unveiled folks for a long time now, and I can’t imagine that level of crossing was done lightly. And that means Layla will at least know a little bit about her coming and going.”

Seymour nodded. “Not much happens out here without the Queen’s eye taking note of it.”

“Let’s move on to the good news.”

“Sugar cube?”

I wagged a finger at them. “Information first. One of us has a history of welching on promises and it isn’t me.”

“That was *one time*, Dale, and I was scared for my life that one time, but fine,” the unicorn snorted, dragging a hoof across the concrete. “The good news is whoever’s watching out for your Detective friend, they’re no slouch in the spell slinging department. That little statuette he was carrying contained some of the most powerful warding magic I’ve ever seen. Good thing I hadn’t wanted to harm the guy, because even my supernatural nature might’ve hit a few snags trying to endure the blowback that thing would’ve set off.”

“You recognize the magic?” Seymour looked over at me, and I sighed, grabbing a second sugar cube, unwrapping it and setting it on my palm for them to lick off.

“Yes and no,” Seymour said, licking their lips before digging in on the sugar cube. “It’s Eastern magic, not Western, and whoever’s responsible for it has also done some of the more powerful legacy protection spells over in Chinatown, the kind that most people don’t even know are there, but wait like coiled serpents just beneath the surface, ready to strike at any supernatural predator who might try to attack the residents of Chinatown. Heavy duty shit. Nothing to be trifled with lightly and certainly not anyone I’d want on my bad side. And certainly someone who’s been around the block more than a few times, so don’t expect it to be a new fish.”

“But you don’t know the caster.”

“I’m not up to date on the big players over there these days, Dale,” Seymour said. “But I’m sure there won’t be more than a dozen casters of that level in that tiny little district. It’s the perfect kind of mystery for you – small and self-contained.”

I rolled my eyes in his direction. I was used to the abuse Seymour liked to hurl at me for their own amusement. “I know you meant that to sound like a dig at me, Seymour, but I’m choosing not to take it as one.”

“You can take it however you like it, Dale. It’s San Francisco, after all, so who am I to judge?”

“Let’s move on to the strange news. It’s not like you to play coy when it comes to showing off your impeccable skill at sniffing out magic.”

Seymour shook their head before looking off and away from me, as if meeting eyes with me would be a little uncomfortable. “There was also a distant odor of magic about your Detective friend that I’m *certain* couldn’t have been what it smelled like, but I also don’t know any other thing that smells even vaguely like that. But, I mean, c’mon, it couldn’t be what it smelled like, so it *had* to be something else, right? Isn’t that that damn Occam’s Pruner that you were trying to tell me about? That even if things seem highly unlikely, that’s the thing they gotta be if you remove everything else?”

“Occam’s Razor, Seymour,” I said to him, “but yeah, that’s the general concept of it. Why? What nearly impossible thing do you think you smelled on Gao?”

“I mean, the odds of it seem so remote...”

“Seymour...”

“I could just be misremembering it...”

“Seymour...”

“It *has* been centuries and—”

“Seymour!”

“Right! Sorry, Dale, sorry. I know how off the rails this is gonna sound, but...”

“But *what* Seymour?”

“But I’m pretty sure I smelled a faint trace of Atlantean on that guy,” the unicorn admitted cryptically. “Not from him personally, but just lingering around him.”

“Could it have been from his Eastern magician friend?”

Seymour shook their massive mane, clearly as perplexed by the mystery as much as I was, sending sparkles of gold dust flying off into the fog. “Negatory, ghost rider, Atlantean has a scent all its own that’s completely unlike anything else. And I got a pretty good whiff of the Eastern caster off of those figurines he’s been giving to your boy.”

“You’re sure it’s a he?”

“Not with 100% certainty, but call it a good 80-90%,” Seymour said, as I fished out another sugar cube. The unicorn’s sweet tooth was notorious to our family, and we’d used it to our advantage as much as we possibly could. “If it’s not a he, they could do with some more fragrances and perfumes. Or, y’know, *any* perfume at all, other than the scent of their lunch.”

“Atlantean, huh? You’re right; that does sound incredibly unlikely.” Atlantis had been trapped behind the Veil for centuries now, and at a particularly strong part of it, one that didn’t allow crisscrossing, because it was ground zero for where the Veil had been started. Hell, I even *know* the location of Atlantis, but as good as I am at spellslinging, I don’t know any magics strong enough to get across the Veil at its peak. Neither did the population of Atlantis, at least as far as the magic community at large knew of. Nobody had heard from them since Merlin had thrown up the Veil, to stop there from being the First Human/Atlantean War, back around the end of the first millennium A.D. (If you’re curious where it is, head west from San Francisco until you’re in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean, north of Hawaii, and you’re in the general vicinity. You won’t find it, though.) “Any chance it’s an Atlantean who got caught outside of the Veil’s construction and has just been wandering around since then?”

The unicorn snorted in what could only be considered laughter. “I forget, there’s whole fields of magic you’ve just never done any homework on.”

I clicked my tongue. “They’ve been gone a thousand years, Seymour. I didn’t see it coming up any time in the field.”

“Atlanteans only live to be a couple of hundred years old, so anyone caught outside would be a descendant of those people, and they smell *very* different. No no, this was the scent of a classical Atlantean, the kind I haven’t smelled since before the Veil went up. But it used to be common enough around these parts.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’re over a thousand years old, Seymour?”

“Four thousand, six hundred and twenty-two,” the unicorn said. “I know you aren’t going to believe me, but that’s completely true.”

“Sure sure, and you fought alongside Merlin during the Megalith Wars,” I joked.

“Oh *hell* no,” Seymour said. “I’m a lover, not a fighter, and if Merlin ever came to ask me to help his bony ass in fighting a war, I’d show him just where I could stick this horn of mine.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“Okay, no I wouldn’t, but I’d definitely *think* about it. But you’re right. I’m not crazy enough to pick a fight with one of the Big Four. Merlin scares the shit out of me.”

“As well he should,” I agreed. “He scares the willies out of me, too.”

Seymour sighed and then sort of leaned their head against my shoulder. “I’m sorry I’m a pain the ass, Dale. We’re just two lonely souls, stuck doing jobs that nobody wants us to do, the watchers on the wall, the last guardians of a time long forgotten.”

“You almost make it sound like you want me to saddle you up and ride you off into the sunset,” I joked, fishing out a handful more of sugar cubes, letting him scarf them up.

“The day you put a saddle on me is the day this whole planet is well and truly fucked.”

“I’ll remember you said that.”

“I have no doubts that you will. So what’s your next stop?”

“You know what it is.”

“Think she’ll be happy to see you?” Seymour asked me.

“Better me than my sister.”

“Why’s that?”

“Last time, Layla and my sister traded blows.”

Seymour scrunched down a little, wincing as if imaging the two fighting. “Can’t imagine that went well for anyone involved on either side.”

“It didn’t.”

“But...”

“But what?”

“But if your *sister* was causing trouble...”

“Yeah yeah,” I said, dumping the rest of the apples and carrots from the disintegrating paper bag onto the pavement. “Layla’s probably going to hold it against me, even though I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“You aren’t your sister’s keeper.”

“If anything, it’s generally the other way around.”

“I *am* a lot more frightened of her than I am of you.”

“You *know* I carry the SoulEnders on me, don’t you?”



“Sure,” the unicorn said, “but at least that’ll be over quickly. Your sister likes to prolong her prey’s agony.”

“Believe me, I know,” I grumbled. “It’s come back to bite us in the ass more than a couple of times. I keep telling her not to play with her food, but every time, she reminds me that she’s the elder sibling and that I shouldn’t tell her how to do her job, just like she doesn’t tell me how to do mine.”

“*Does* she tell you how to do yours?”

“She tried. Once.”

“What happened?”

“I threatened make her watch as the SoulEnders did their job, and she politely declined, saying that level of pain and suffering is reserved for the family’s Gunslinger.”

“So at least you’ve got that over her.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, starting to walk away from them. “A’ight Seymour, I’ll be seeing you.”

“Tell Layla I said hello.”

I turned back to look over my shoulder at them. “Really?”

“On second thought, no. Forget my name the entire time you’re around her.”

I chuckled and looked forward again, as I wondered just how pissed off the Barbarian Queen of the Western Coastal Elves was going to be at me this time around.

### Chapter Three – “Willful Manchild”

Here’s a bit of Bay Area trivia you probably don’t know – Treasure Island has a smaller island a couple of miles to the north of it. You won’t find it on any maps. In fact, none of the boats really know it’s there – they just sort of drift around it. It’s not a very big island, only a hundred acres or so of space, but it’s invisible to anyone who can’t see beyond the veil of magic. For me to get out there, I have to hop onto a small boat we keep up at Fisherman’s Wharf and just scoot out there.

Normally if I wanted to talk to the Barbarian Queen, I’d have headed to her home somewhere between Pacifica and Half Moon Bay, but I knew that one of the dignitaries was in town, which meant it was likely the Accords were being discussed, and that kind of business could only be held on Crossroads Island, which was *fine* by me.

Crossroads Island was a place where violence was completely forbidden, and by that, I meant impossible, or at least as far as anyone knew. Even on approach, you could feel a heavy sense of calm sinking into you, as if you were being bestowed with tranquility. The various players in the magical realms had always used Crossroads Island as the West Coast meeting place, knowing that violence couldn’t break out there.

Now, I’ve never *tested* the push against violence on Crossroads Island, but I knew what sort of negotiations had been held here over the generations without violence breaking out, and the weight of that history was good enough for me to know not to even consider trying.

There were two boats already at the small docks for the island, but thankfully there was room to fit about six different craft around the docks if needed, as long as nobody was bringing in some kind of ridiculous luxury ship. One of them was the royal craft of the West Coast Elves, the other was a local rented craft, but one glance at the contents of the boat told me immediately who’d rented it. Too many axes and maces to be anyone else.

The Dignitaries were here.

I moored my craft against the docks and started walking up the path towards the Grotto. The Island only had a handful of things on it – four cabins, each with some basic amenities. I remembered spending a week with Dad and Charlotte there when The Predator Accords were being arranged, which would allow vampires to roam the earth and hunt, but also to allow there to be hunting protocols for hunting vampires.

I remember it being some of the tensest times of my childhood because I couldn’t understand why the Magical Nations were *negotiating* with the vampire families. I was almost a teenager, but I remember being extremely bothered by the fact that we weren’t just *eliminating* the vampires. My father, the Gunslinger before I took over the role, told me something that day that I’ve never forgotten. “They want to live, Dale. They want to live and thrive like the rest of us, but their very existence is a threat to our kind. And it’s not a Gunslinger’s job to determine the fate of an entire species. But we need to establish rules so that the monsters have enough space to live and survive, but not so much that they prevent anyone else from doing so.”

Decades later, I’d come to understand why the decisions were made, but I still wondered if I’d have been able to remain as calm as my father was during those negotiations. Because he was talking about number of humans killed per year per continent like it was the profit and loss for any other business, and I couldn’t help but think, those were people with names, parents, lives.

I could talk a lot more about the Predator Accords, but that's a story for a different day, and one that I don't really have time to get into right now. Let's just leave it at saying it was one of my father's more problematic decisions, but that in all the years between there and here, I haven't seen a better solution on offer, so there's that. Sometimes Daddy does indeed know best.

The island itself is covered in dense foliage, the sort of trees that I'm sure tourists would find utterly magnificent, if they could only see them, but the Veil over Crossroads Island was one of the strongest I'd ever encountered, and I think the only reason I'd gotten so accustomed to being able to see past it was because I'd been brought here so much growing up, so that I'd built up a tolerance for it. The trees were mighty redwoods, the sort of thick trunked megaliths that we had so few of left in the world these days, with a high canopy providing coverage from the regular spouts of rain. The path leading from the docks to the cabins was actually paved with inlaid brick, more of the style of ancient road, just in case heavier things were being brought to and from the cabins or the central meeting hall.

The construction of the buildings had obviously been contributed to by a number of various magical players – the basic structure itself was Dwarven handiwork, but the filigree work was clearly elvish in design, the artwork hanging on the walls was mostly dragon work although all the major players had hung at least one or two pieces of decoration around both the cabins and the meeting hall.

I did love coming here, even if it was rarely for good reasons. I think I'd been on this island no less than once a season since the time I was eight, so I had plenty of memories, both good and bad associated with the place.

“I did not expect to see you here, Gunslinger,” a deep, jolly voice I was quite fond of said to me. “I would've given you a call if we'd expected to have free time while we were in town, but alas, we knew business was going to consume all our time.”

“Lord Deepcavern,” I laughed. “I won't take it personal that you didn't call me, but I think we're well beyond you calling me by my title, don't you?”

“You're still calling me by mine, Dale, so until you drop it...”

“Fine, Klax, fine,” I said, moving over to the dwarf who I'd known for my entire life. He was a stout and sturdy fellow, with arms like tree trunks, a heavy hitter with the kind of braided black beard most dwarves would be heavily jealous of. Klax was third in line to the Deepcavern Throne, the head family of the North American dwarves. I offered my hand for him to shake, but he grabbed my arm by the wrist, making us clasp forearms before pulling me into a big bear hug. “What're you doing here anyway?”

“Queen Heartseye has been giving us guff about our shipments as of late, saying we've been under delivering to her and her people, but I've assured her that whatever problems there have been with the shipments, they haven't been in what we're sending,” he said, his annoyance clear in his tone of voice.

“So, you keep saying to me, Lord Deepcavern,” a majestic if somewhat impatient voice said, stepping into the meeting hall. Queen Layla Heartseye stood close to seven feet tall, and was dressed, as she often was, in little more than an armor and leather bikini, doing little to conceal that absolutely smokin' body of hers from anyone's gaze. She had long, curly red hair that hung down to the tops of those remarkable breasts of hers, and her face was refined without looking too regal, because it was clear her nose had been broken more than once. She was both intrinsically one of the most beautiful looking women I'd ever laid eyes on, but also one of the most dangerous. And I still haven't decided if the pointy

ears are a turn off or a turn on. Maybe it's both. I'm complicated like that. "And I keep telling you that your deliveries have shown up lacking their full contents for the last several months."

"I don't see how that's possible, your majesty," Klax said.

"Oh, I do," I volunteered. "You're getting shorted in transit."

Both of them turned to look at me, which told me neither of them had considered that option. "That... shouldn't be possible," the Queen said to me. "We have the Canasta Sisters handling the transportation, and their reputation—"

"Their reputation doesn't figure into it," I said confidently. "Maybe someone's on the take. Maybe they're getting robbed in transit and they don't know it. Maybe someone's clipping the difference on the loading or unloading end. But if you're sure the count's right at the load, and you're sure the count's wrong at the unload, then the space in between is all you have left to look at."

Now, keep in mind, I knew the Canasta Sisters had a reputation of being impeccable, which was why the royalists before me had overlooked the option, but I also knew that reputations weren't forever, and that the Canasta Sisters had been coasting on that reputation long enough that someone within their organization had probably felt like it was enough of a screen to keep anyone from wondering if they were leaking from the middle instead of one of the ends.

"You want to look into them, your Highness, or shall we?" Klax asked her.

"We *both* should, Lord Deepcavern, so that we can ensure the impartiality of our investigations," Queen Heartseye said, before turning her smoldering gaze unto me. "Lord Gunslinger, I am unaccustomed to being in debt to your kind, and I am certain that you came seeking my counsel. Please, ask your questions so that I might be able to remove myself from your debt herewith."

Despite the fact that she's always referred to as the barbarian queen of the west coast elves, she *does* in fact *always* talk like that. I'd asked my father once why they all called her a barbarian; he told me that it wasn't meant to imply inferior or uncivilized, but to focus on the overly violent aspect of the word. Then he told me how many of her sisters she had slain to assume the title of Queen. Again, I couldn't tell if that made her more or less hot. Even Charlotte had to admit the level of swagger the queen carried herself with added a certain layer of allure.

"I've come to ask you about Saoirse Staire, your majesty."

"I know this leannán sídhe, aye, Gunslinger," the Queen said. "What questions do you have of her?"

"Excuse us, your majesty," Klax said, "but if you would kindly permit, I'm going to go begin looking into our next shipment and see if we can set a little trap for our would-be pilferers."

"Fine, Lord Deepcavern. See to it."

I smirked a little bit, because the Queen was obviously more than a little distracted. She'd just given away one piece of information for free – confirming that Saoirse was, in fact, leannán sídhe. I'd had Seymour's word on it, but she'd just gone ahead and solidified that information for me. "Let's start with, 'is she a member of good standing in your court?'"

“She’s one of the serfs within my kingdom, aye, but certainly not one of any form of nobility,” the Queen said as we started to walk alongside one another, stepping out of the great hall to begin walking down the path towards the water once more. “Are you asking in anticipation of having to put her down?”

“I don’t *know* what I’m asking about her yet, your majesty,” I chuckled. “It’s very early days, and I’m just starting to try and get an understanding of who the players are, and how they fit together. You’re aware she has a human lover?”

“Mmmm,” the Queen nodded. “A human police officer. We were informed when the affair began, as per the Romance Treaties, and we gave permission for it to begin.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Two or three years ago, I suppose. It was one of a series of requests we received, but we generally do not do much research into them, and give them... what was the expression your father preferred? Ah. We ‘rubber stamp’ them unless we see significant problems on the immediate horizon.”

“Gao’s a cop. Usually that kind of thing gives your people a bit of pause before they’re willing to sign off on them.”

“Mmm,” the Queen said. “The more we have come to study those humans with authority – politicians, businessmen, police – the more we have come to realize how close they protect their secrets. It is highly unlikely this ‘cop,’ as you say, would discover Saoirse’s true nature, and if he did, it’s even less likely he would be eager to break the Accords by divulging her true nature, even if he didn’t know of their existence. He would be concerned that he would be labeled as insane or unwell.” She turned to look down at me. “He isn’t planning on doing such things, is he? Because that would be *your* concern regarding how to deal with such a matter. The Keeper of Secrets is one of the titles *you* bear, Gunslinger.”

“I don’t need you telling me what my jobs are, your highness, much like you don’t see me stomping in here, dictating how you oversee your subjects and their decisions.”

The Queen laughed a little. “You’ve grown much more courage since we first met, Gunslinger,” she said, a hint of admiration to her tone. “I like it. It suits you. You’re no longer the shy, timid young boy I remember hiding behind his father’s duster during meetings.”

“Carrying the SoulEnders with you tends to age anyone, your Highness, much less having to *use* them.”

“*Have* you ever had to use them, Gunslinger?” she asked, and for the first time in all my conversations with her, I could sense just the tiniest amount of fear tinged to her words.

“I have.”

Those words filled the space like it was trying to suck all the oxygen out of our lungs.

“How was the experience?”

I frowned a little, trying not to put myself back in the headspace of the times I’d been forced to actually *fire* the weapons I carried with me. “It is not one I would willingly wish upon others, your majesty. Taking a life is one thing; taking a *soul* is quite another.”

“So it’s true? You do feel some connection with the soul, as your weapons are destroying it?”

“Every soul I have ever let the SoulEnders devour has imprinted a scar upon my own heart, your majesty. It is not an easy thing to do, nor should it be.” I’d never known her to show much interest in my title or specific profession. The position, that of Gunslinger, has always been looked upon with a certain level of fear and reverence, even by the most deadly of magical denizens.

She chuckled, looking up at the fog that had draped over the tops of the trees that canvased the tiny island. “Forgive me, Gunslinger. Your kind has long held sway over my imagination, and so rarely are we afforded the ability to simply discuss matters one on one in an environ such as this, without the eyes of the court gazing upon us. You were saying?”

“I was saying that I’ve just *begun* to look into what’s happening with Saoirse Staire, your majesty. I’m certain that I am miles away from understanding exactly what it is this case is all about.”

“Then why take the case, if it’s proving to be so problematic?”

“I didn’t say it was problematic; I said I was just getting started. Cases like this, they’re never what they seem on first blush,” I told her. “She’s been missing seven days now. You have anything to do with her disappearance?”

“Absolutely not,” the Queen said. “Why would we have?”

“That’s going to be my next question.”

“She’s a serf, Lord Gunslinger,” the Queen sniffed. “She’s lucky I even recognized the name at all without having to call upon one of my assistants to jog my memory.”

“And yet, you remembered her nonetheless.”

“Mmm.” The Queen glanced away from me, peering out across the Bay, or at least as far as the fog would let her peer out. “There was a certain sense of joy permeating from her, something I do not see very often. She loves your Detective Gao very much, and I do not suspect that wherever she is, if she’s been kept from him, that it is willingly. She even offered to rescind her magical nature, if that was what we would demand of her for her to spend her life with this Gao man, something not spoken of in hundreds of years. Behind her eyes, one could see the sort of love that poets wrote about in the olden days.”

I grinned with a slight shrug amidst the shadows. “That sort of poetry’s usually in song lyrics these days.”

“Mmm. I have heard these rock lyrics of which you speak, where ‘bitches be down with the illness’ or some such buffoonery,” she said, shaking her lowered head. “The romance has nearly entirely left you people and your foolish ways.”

“Oh we’re not *all* entirely without romance or style, your majesty.”

“Indeed, willful manchild,” she sniffed. “Your previous paramour, the Lady of Cold Waters, had plenty of kind things to say about you, but she also said you were often stubborn-headed, spiteful and flippant when it came to her concerns.”

“Her concerns were about shit that didn’t matter, such as color coordinating our attire for your little shindigs,” I said, deliberately underplaying the importance, knowing it would rile her up even more. I hadn’t been able to speak with the West Coast Elven Queen alone before now, so it was important to take measure of her temperament myself, and not rely on father’s words about her.

“The Winter Cotillion requires that attendees and their partners wear matching attire! Your stance to ‘come as you were’ flew in the face of tradition and honor!” she shouted, that temper flaring up. “I suspect that was the point, though, wasn’t it? To display that the Gunslinger, as much as he or she may interact with the communities they protect, are still above them and their traditions.”

“Nah,” I said with a smirk. “It was more just to remind you that you can *ask* whatever you want from those attending your parties, but that you can’t mandate that they follow along with those asks. Alaizia and I were already starting to see significant cracks in our relationship, so it felt like a fine place for me to take a stand on what I believe in. And I believe in individualism.”

“And it had nothing to do with spitting in the eye of your romantic rival for the lady’s affections?”

“Look, I knew Lord UptightPants was showing up, but I didn’t know that he was *that* much of a stickler for tradition. And I knew he was into Alaizia, so I suspected he might put up a minor ruckus, but I figured him to have more common sense than to affront a Gunslinger.”

“And yet, when he challenged you to a duel, you still accepted.”

“It wasn’t a *lethal* duel.”

“It *could’ve* been.”

“Captain ThunderBritches didn’t have the stomach for it,” I said confidently. “He wanted to put on a big show of just how aggrieved he was, but nothing but talk was ever going to come out of him. I wasn’t ever worried about it turning serious.”

“You broke three of his ribs!”

“And he’s lucky that’s *all* I broke,” I grumbled. “The man refused to yield after he’d lost, and per the terms of dueling – I wasn’t *allowed* to stop hurting him until he yielded or could no longer speak. Those aren’t *my* terms, your majesty – that’s in the Dueling Accords, which were ratified long before my birth, and as such, I’m held accountable to them, just as much any anyone else.”

“You could’ve hit him less energetically,” she growled.

“He wouldn’t have learned as much if I did.”

“You think he learned *anything* from that beating?”

“I think he learned that just because he has a title and a little bit of prestige doesn’t make him untouchable, and he probably also learned that just because a fellow doesn’t get all gussied up for every party he’s invited to doesn’t mean he’s incapable of defending himself when a lout gets churlish,” I said. “I wasn’t going out of my way to provoke him, your highness, but I’m also not going to let someone slander me, my family, my profession or my lineage, and frankly, I would’ve expected more understanding from someone like yourself about besmirched honor.”

“Oh, I do understand about honor, Gunslinger,” the Queen said, trying to keep her tone even keeled when she spoke to me. “But I think it was just as much about getting to beat up a nobleman as it was maintaining your honor.”

“I gave him *multiple* chances to retract his statement, even after he challenged me to a duel. I would’ve much *rather* he backed down, because having to thrash him made me look a bit like a bully, because I *knew* he couldn’t put up much of a fight. We were never in the same class of combatant.”

“Then why not refuse the duel?”

“Because refusing the duel puts into the public record the validity of his claims, which I cannot abide by,” I sighed. “You saw me, Layla. I wanted him to back off. I promise you, I did. I tried everything I could *think of* to get him to back down, to rescind his statements, to give me any possible way out other than beating the shit out of him. But the second Lord Trunkfoot challenged me to a formal duel, we were locked into the Dueling Accords until one of us yielded or one of us was unable to answer when asked if we wanted to continue. You’re the Queen of the West Coast Elves, Layla, and I know you understand what it’s like to be bound to rules you don’t happen to agree with. If I didn’t abide by the Dueling Accords, I would’ve weakened the position of the Gunslinger as one of the primary rules enforcers independent of all other factions.”

“Then why did you look as though you were taking great joy in the matter, Dale?”

“Because…” I started then stopped, letting out a very tired breath. “Because I have a reputation to uphold, and it’s one reinforced by the notion that the Druid Gunslinger is one of the true primal and elemental forces left in the world, one that does not get tangled with lightly or without consequence. My father ignored attire suggestions all the time, but that prick never once said anything to *him* about it. But less than two years after I’d assumed the mantle, that ignorant noble decided he needed to see if the new guy had a spine. I’d actually been expecting it for months – not him personally, but someone *like* him, assuming that because the position of Gunslinger had been passed to a new mantle wearer, that the new guy would be a push over for the first few years. Dad told me something like that duel would coming, and that when it happened, I needed to go as aggressively over the top as I could, to establish dominance, to establish *fear*, to make sure that anyone looking on realized that while there was a *new* Gunslinger, I was nobody’s fool, and not to be trifled with.”

Despite the fact that Charlotte had told me she was exceptionally proud of me after the duel, I considered it one of my greatest failures, simply because I hadn’t gotten Lord Trunkfoot to back down. I knew in that moment that my appearance with everyone was everything, and that meant I could offer no signs of weakness. I was the new guy. New should’ve meant uncertain, they incorrectly all had thought. The elf had immediately escalated his insults to a duel when I’d asked him to retract them.

I was given the choice of time, to which I responded we would begin imminently. He was given the choice of weapons, to which he responded bare fists. I was given the choice of arena – I chose the dance floor. He was given the choice of severity – he chose non-fatal, as I knew he would. We were each given our choice of seconds – I chose my sister, Charlotte Sexton, the Druid Huntmistress, he chose Treyton Gallows, the Queen’s Executioner.

I knew that Trunkfoot had thought I would have grown up reliant on SoulEnders, and that a Gunslinger without his Guns would be an easy and manageable fight, but I’d grown up under Charlotte’s watchful eye, and not a single day had passed from the day from the day I turned 4 until the day I turned 21 that I didn’t spend at least an hour sparring with my sister, meaning I was trained in every weapon imaginable, including the weapon of my own body.

For most of my teenage years, I thought I was being groomed to take over the Huntsmaster position, the one previously held by my Uncle Oscar, but on my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, my father pulled both me



and my sister aside, and informed us of the roles he and Oscar expected us to play in their events of their passing. Oscar had no family to speak of, and so it had been decided that Charlotte would become Druid Huntmistress, meaning she would be the oversight and controller for all hunters in North America, and that she would be engaging in most of the culling activities required of us. She would bear SpiritCrusher, the blade of that position, and she would have hundreds, if not thousands, of hunters reporting to her regularly. I, on the other hand, would take over the duty of the Druid Gunslinger, the final arbitrator of interfaction squabbles, and the investigator of mysteries.

Neither Charlotte or I were initially pleased with our assignments, but Dad and Uncle Oscar spent the next few hours explaining why they'd made the decisions that they had. Charlotte was, as Oscar pointed out, exceptional at overkill, and easily the better hunter in the wild of the two of us. She pointed out that she felt that should entitle her to the position of Gunslinger, but Dad pointed out that, through no fault of her own, she didn't have the *temperament* needed to be Gunslinger. Over the years, we'd been tested in every way we could imagine, and it had turned out Charlotte had a rather serious disdain for both puzzles and complex machinations, whereas I'd grown up addicted to murder mystery books and the court intrigue of Alexander Dumas.

"The Huntmaster is the biggest, baddest hammer we have in our toolbox, Charlotte," Dad had said to her. "The Gunslinger has to be the scalpel. One isn't better or worse than the other – they're just different. Besides, would you really want to spend that much time dealing with all the Courts?"

Charlotte had groaned and then nodded in agreement, two years my senior. "You're right, Dad."

Three years later, Uncle Oscar had been killed in a raid on a rusalka lair, and Charlotte had become the youngest person ever to assume the role of Huntmistress at the age of 22. It would be another decade before Dad died, and I took on the role of Gunslinger, a few days after my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. I'd sort of started believing Dad was going to live forever, but nobody ever does. And as for whether we were suited for our roles, as he was in most things, father had been spot on. Charlotte enjoyed the hunt; I enjoyed the unravelling of knots.

Trunkfoot was an accomplished fisticuffs fighter, but he was completely unprepared for the like of me, despite all the effort I took to give him ample chances to yield. See, he was a boxer, and he expected we would be trading punches like a couple of brain damaged idiots, but I knew the rules of the Dueling Accords far better than he did. Choosing 'bare fists' only meant no external weapons, and no natural weaponry we didn't both share; so, for example, if his kind had naturally had venomous elbow spurs, he wouldn't have been able to use them because I, as a human, didn't possess those. But both he and I had feet, which meant those were fair game.

That meant when he was swinging his first lumbering fist in my direction, I snapped a roundhouse kick across the side of his head. It knocked him clean to the ground as people around had cheered my violence. I offered him another chance to retract his statement, and instead he stood up and charged me wildly, a move I'd foreseen and simply leaped over him as he fell back onto the floor, his grapple catching only air and embarrassment.

I knew winning the fight wasn't the most important thing. Making it look *easy* while winning the fight *was*. I needed everyone to understand how deadly serious I took the Accords, as I was obliged to by my title and status. Trunkfoot had thought he was going to peel an apology from my whimpering form, but instead, I beat the ever-living crap out of him without breaking a sweat, without so much as even looking bothered by it. I did my best to look bored much of the time, as if the application of injury was beneath me.

When he was knocked down, after two or three minutes of playing the part of my punching bag in my one-man exhibition on the dispensation and application of violence, I offered him yet another chance to yield, but he shouted that as long as he could speak, he would never yield.

I took him at his word.

In accordance with the Dueling Accords, an opponent who is able to voice opposition is still a viable opponent. I began then to kick him in the stomach while he was down, making sure each sharp snap of my leg was inflicting serious wounds without causing any life-threatening injuries. During that moment, I had allowed my expression to carry with it a certain degree of joy, not delight in causing pain, but more of satisfaction in a job well done, as if I was simply setting expectations should anyone further wish to challenge me to a duel.

That was the part I was most annoyed by with all of it, I guess, that nobody recognized I was displaying an immense amount of control and restraint. ‘Accidental’ deaths in these types of duels happened often enough and were seen as unfortunate side effects of a party refusing to yield when they should have. I could’ve killed the elf very easily. In fact, making sure I *didn’t* kill him was harder than it would’ve been to allow him to just die by several orders of magnitude. But I had to make it look easy, and make it look like I was taking satisfaction in ensuring the elf’s submission.

Eventually, Trunkfoot had slumped to the floor, unable to speak, his consciousness blissfully retreated behind the curtain of pain into the nothingness of sleep’s oblivion, and when Treyton Gallows had proven he was unable to answer, I was formally anointed victor of the duel. Alaizia had broken up with me later that evening; she and Lord Trunkfoot had been wed last autumn. Naturally, I’d not been invited to the wedding.

“Am I likely to find you engaging in other duels with my subjects, Gunslinger?” the Queen asked, snapping my mind back to the current moment.

“That was years ago, your majesty, and nobody’s been so foolish as to ask me for a duel since, so, as distasteful as the entire evening might have been, it seems to have had the intended effect,” I said. “And I might remind you that you’ve called on the services of the Gunslinger before, and I have yet to deny you, despite you denying me a dinner date.”

“Queens and Gunslingers do not mix, Lord Sexton.”

“Says who?”

“Tradition.”

“Don’t queens *establish* tradition?” I asked with a smirk.

She grinned back at me. “The *stones* on you, Gunslinger. Flirting with an elf ten times your age. Surely you have other questions regarding your missing leannán sídhe.”

“What work did she do for you?”

“She was a wallwatcher, an envoy between us and the Northeastern Pacific Sea Dwellers, but our two kinds so rarely interact, I never expected more than a yearly report from her, and the rest of the time, she was free to do as she saw fit.”

The fact that she’d had experience with the Sea Dwellers certainly put another piece of information into a new light. “Any experience dealing with the Atlantians?”

The Queen looked at me very suddenly, too suddenly. “Why would you ask this?”

“Seymour said he detected a bit of old school Atlantean magic around Detective Gao, and I’m still trying to make sense of that.”

“The unicorn was certainly mistaken. The Atlanteans are within their dome, and nothing crosses in or out.”

“That’s the story, anyway,” I said. “But has anybody been out for a looksee lately?”

“Alarms would’ve sounded in every major kingdom across this world, Gunslinger. I am telling you; it is not possible.”

“And I’m telling *you*, your majesty, that nothing is impossible, and that’s something every Gunslinger learns very early on. Anything else you can offer me in terms of useful information about this woman under your dominion?”

The Queen scowled a little. “Only an entreaty that you attempt to bring her back safely. We’ve had a rough year, and if it gets out that a member of my kingdom has disappeared without my knowledge, it will imply weakness on my behalf.”

I nodded. “Then poke around with those in her circle in your formal inquiries, and I’ll circle around again, Queen Heartseye, and perhaps one of us will have made some progress.” I offered her a bow. “Farewell, your highness.” Then stood up, spun on a single heel and walked back to my boat.

Coming to see her had answered little and asked far more. I was also certain that I was going to be hearing more about Atlantis as time went on, which meant I was probably going to have to talk to The Captain sooner or later. Still, I would keep it in the later column as long as possible. My next stop was probably going to give me even more questions, but at least it was someone I knew would be trying to lie to me.

Time to go see Digger.

## Chapter Four – “Fucking Tourists”

There were lots of people I hated to go and visit. Usually it was because I didn't want to see them in the first place. Digger Wiig wasn't that way at all. In fact, the reservations I usually had about going and seeing Digger were more about being able to get away from him with some portion of my liver still functioning and a few brain cells rattling around inside of my head. You hear those stories about those folks were the life of the party? I've been convinced for as long as I've known him that Digger Wiig was, in fact, the living *embodiment* of all parties. Now, I know that he *isn't* – Digger's human, and I've had my both late father and my late uncle as well as my sister confirm that – but that doesn't mean that there's a party anywhere in the Bay Area that Digger's not only *at* but is likely closing down.

There is no party in the Bay Area worth going to that Digger Wiig isn't at.

No, I don't know how he does it, either.

Digger would've been an excellent wizard if he'd applied himself to it, but instead, he'd become casually known as 'The Hook Up,' because he'd become the Apothecary to The Parties, providing magical intoxication and inebriation to anyone with the money to pony up for it, and his work did not come cheap. It also meant he had access to pretty much anywhere or anything he wanted, and that he was one of the best sources of information around, whenever I wanted to tap into that particular streak of resources.

Now, normally I wouldn't go do Digger for this kind of thing, because Saoirse Staire wasn't a big party girl, but if the Queen knew who she was without me even so much as having to jog her memory much, there was a good chance that the girl had made an impression on other people in the party scene, and that meant Digger would at least know who she was, and he might have kept track if other people were asking about her.

The funny thing about Digger is that Digger's what's called “Protected Caste,” of which there are about two dozen of in the Bay Area at any one time, myself included. That means Digger's sort of got the magical equivalent of diplomatic immunity. More than anything, it means I don't generally have to worry about him saying the wrong thing at a party and turning up dead. But it also means his location is reported to me on a real-time basis, as the Druid Gunslinger. My sister has access to the same data, although she very rarely uses it, and even then, odds are better than most that she's simply checking on *my* location. I'm not so proud as to be unable to admit I've done the same on her myself.

Magic and technology have this weird sort of dislike of each other, but there's a handful of people who've made it work over the centuries, and the technoforgers are a class unto themselves, so it's worth noting that while the tracking technology exists, it's... finicky. Oh, it can find people, but it's terribly with verticality, which was why I found myself standing at the bottom of the W Hotel in San Francisco, looking upwards with a long sigh. He was probably at the top of the building in some sort of club or party atmosphere, but if he wasn't, it was going to be a bit of no fun trying to pinpoint his actual location down. I'd complained about it the representative of the Technoforger's Union, who insisted it was on 'her list of things to work on.' I suspected it was down near the bottom, below 'font choice' and just above 'dark mode.' It's practically criminal how little our input affected the development of the app. I'd suggested as much once, and Lady BitBolt had asked me if I had contributed any jewels or precious metals into their retirement fund within the last decade or so. All of which was a polite way of telling me that if I wanted a feature integrated into the app, I'd better put some money where my mouth was.

One of the many places I'd spent money *instead* was some place a lot more street level – I'd greased the palms of pretty much every nightclub manager, every late hotel shift chief, every struggling motel clerk and so many bartenders that I'd actually used a spell to keep all the names easily accessible in my mind. So as soon as I walked into the lobby, I recognized the night clerk's name was Eli. I headed over towards him with a slight smile. "Digger," I asked him. "You know if he's—"

"Top floor, Mr. Sexton," came back the response before I'd even finished with the question. "He's been up there with the AmperSandyDuncans album release party for a couple of hours, so I imagine he won't be up there for too much longer."

I dropped a twenty on the counter as I walked on by. "Thanks Eli, I'll take it from here."

On the elevator ride up, I had plenty of time to think what an absolutely *awful* name for a band 'AmperSandyDuncans' was. I mean, even now... Just... *Wow*. Like, I'm sure worse band names exist or have existed out there, but I couldn't think of any. In fact, I wasn't thinking about the case, the Queen, the sidhe, or anything even remotely related to our world, other than perhaps idly wondering if maybe someone had cursed this band to be forced to wear this moniker like a mark of shame that they weren't allowed to remove at any costs under penalty of death. There had to be some legitimate cause or trauma that was keeping them releasing albums under this name.

No one could hate themselves this much voluntarily.

I sort of changed my mind about that when the elevator doors opened and I *heard* the AmperSandyDuncans for the first time. It was somehow both sludge rock *and* speed rock all at the same time. Like, it was almost that mumbling 90s grunge era vocals played over these syrupy, almost droning guitars, and yet, the musicians were constantly changing chords, back and forth between an E and an E minor, and there was something so inescapably *dull* about it all. Maybe the name was doing a good thing, I thought to myself, steering people away from having to listen to this monumentally *piss poor* excuse for music in the first place.

That said, it seemed like most of the local scenesters were lingering around the place – label heads, PR managers, trade industry press, models wanting to get noticed, musicians wanting to get noticed, dancers wanting to get noticed... and then maybe a dozen or so people who seemed to genuinely love the sound of the band, and were out on the floor doing something no sane human being alive would describe as 'dancing.'

It was coming up on midnight, which meant this party would be going for another two to three hours, whether it wanted to or not. Those wise enough to leave had probably gotten out after taking half an hour to make appearances, make sure they were noticed and then slipped out the back, and everyone now was basically pot committed into losing the night.

Over at the bar was the person I was looking for. It was never all that hard to spot Digger. He's got to be like 6'5" and weighs over 300lbs. He's almost shaped like the Michelin Man, sort of like a swollen person, like there's water in every part of him. His hair's thinning, but to compensate for that, he's letting the rest of it grow long, pulled back into a hipster's rat tail. He had a pair of circular shaped Harry Potter style glasses that I'd always told him made him look ridiculous, but then again, he was always pulling women left and right, so who was I to tell him he was in the wrong. Not that I do so bad myself.

He was talking to an Indian woman who had certainly dolled herself up for a night out on the town, a dress that was basically two pieces of red fabric – one front and one back – with laces running

from the neckline all the way down to mid-thigh on each side, exposed windows of bare flesh on each side of her, sleeveless, with a very daring and plunging neckline down the front. Her black hair was pulled back tightly into a ponytail of onyx curls that basically exploded out of the back of her head. She had a gold ring through one nostril and a red bindi in the center of her forehead. The way she was smoothing her hand atop of Digger's forearm made it clear that they'd been in this conversation for a while.

"Hey Digger," I said, stepping up on the other side of him. "Who's your new friend?"

He turned to glance at me, and I noticed his eyes seemed a little bit glossy, something very much unlike Digger. "Oh, hey man. This is my new friend Navya. Navya, this is my old friend Dale."

For those kids at home keeping score, this was the moment where I screwed up, and it nearly cost me. But thankfully, some very ingrained defenses were about to kick in.

"Hey Navya," I said to her, not really giving her much more than a cursory glance. "I need to borrow Digger for a bit."

"Why don't you sit and join us for a bit first, Dale?" Navya said, as she reached over and placed her other hand on top of my forearm.

In that moment, my olfactory senses were hit with a very familiar blast, a combination of scents I'd not experienced for some time. It was sandalwood, a combination of orange and pineapple citrus and a hint of old school watch oil. It was a combination of scents designed to evoke a period in my life where I was my most trusting, my most open, my most honest...

*...my most vulnerable.*

In the space between heartbeats, I'd erected an illusion of normality around us with my left hand, stepped behind Navya, and drawn one of the SoulEnders and pressed the eldritch steel tip of the barrel to her throat, hearing her flesh sizzle in unwelcome response. The hammer was already back, and the slightest move would've sent the round in the chamber to action.

"You're *new in town*, aren't you, Navya?" I snarled.

"I don't—"

"You have a SoulEnders pressed against your neck right now, so I think you best reconsider that thought you were just having about lying to me," I said, absolutely zero fucks to be given in my tone of voice. "According to the Predator Accords, what's the first thing a Predator does when entering a new zone they intend to hunt in?"

"Dale," Digger said to me, trying to shake the confusion from his eyes. "What's—"

"Shut up, Digger," I told him. "I'll get to your ass in a minute. Go on, Navya, Rule #1 about a Predator entering a new zone. What is it?"

Navya swallowed a breath, wincing as she did, because the very act of swallowing made the gun barrel move and singe a different part of her exposed neckflesh. She was holding perfectly still, so I have a feeling the gun barrel against her neck had illuminated just how badly she'd fucked up to her. "Check in with the local captains."

"Gooooood," I sneered. "And *why* do you have to check in with the local captains?"

"To get the Protected List. So as to not upset the balance."

“And you didn’t do that because...?”

“I was hungry, human, and I think that trumps some silly list.”

I inhaled a *very* controlled breath then exhaled it. I would entirely within my rights to blow this damn succubus’s head off right here in the W, and the SoulEnder would only thank me for getting the chance to use its abilities once more in this world. “You really want to make that point with a SoulEnder against your throat?”

“You’re just *saying* it’s a SoulEnder,” she scoffed. “You’re far too *young* to be Lane Sexton.”

“You’re right about that, moron. I’m *Dale* Sexton, son of the late Lane Sexton, and current holder of the title of Druid Gunslinger,” I said, letting the barrel drag along her throat, making sure her flesh boiled and scabbed a little as it moved past. The moment the words left my lips, she knew they had to be true, and that made her start to quake in fear. “And you attempted to instigate a hunt on not one but *two* members of the Protected Caste here in the Bay. I *should* put you down on general fucking principal, and then call Sirena myself, let her know that somebody’s relative wasn’t going to making that first meeting any more, because they’d decided to try and go hunt the fucking *Druid Gunslinger*. Shit, I’d probably be doing you a *favor* by ending your soul, which is why I’m *not* going to do it.”

“W-w-w-w-what?”

I slowly eased the hammer back down into place, flicked the safety back on and brought the SoulEnder away from her neck. “You’re going to go tell Sirena how badly you fucked up, and we’ll see what sort of punishment she decides is fair. I’m sure she’s going to *love* how you’d been getting close to feeding on someone with immunity before you attempted to feed on one of the two people who’s legally permitted to *kill you* for your transgression.”

“I, I, I... I didn’t...”

“It’s remarkable how *stupid* Sirena is going to find you.”

“I’m... I’m sorry...”

I pulled the SoulEnder away from her neck and moved to holster it once more, shaking my head. “Not yet you aren’t,” I said to her. “But believe me... once you talk to Sirena, you *will* be.”

The woman reeled from me as quickly as she could once I’d released her, and she was sprinting towards the elevator, but then decided not to wait, and headed down the stairwell. Maybe she’d stopped part way down and hopped onto an elevator, but she wanted to get at least a few floors away from me.

Digger’s eyes started blinking quickly, faster and faster, then stopping suddenly, turning to look at me, shaking the confusion from his eyes. “Dale?”

“Yeah Digger?”

“Where the fuck am I?”

“The W Hotel. The album release party for someone called the AmperSandyDuncans.”

Digger frowned. “Really?”

I shrugged at him. “You chose to be here, man.”

“Why does my head feel all fucking fuzzy?”

“You were being warmed up by a succubus when I got here,” I told him, feeling my own head starting to clear.

Digger scowled at me. “That doesn’t sound right. I’m protected. They can’t hunt me.”

“It was an out-of-towner who hadn’t bothered to touch base with the local captain before she went out hunting.”

“Well *that* was the stupidest fucking idea I’ve ever heard.”

“Yeah, you ain’t kidding,” I agreed. “I’m certainly glad I showed up when I did, otherwise I’d have been investigating your murder instead.”

“You think she would’ve—”

“She tried to pick me up as well, which means she was planning on having a two-for-one deal, except both her choices were on the ‘do not touch’ portion of the menu.”

Digger’s eyes widened. “And you let her *walk*?”

I shrugged a little bit. “Maybe I’m getting soft. Maybe I’m more interested in what kind of punishment Sirena’s going to come up with.”

“What made you realize she was luring us?”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it. Anyway, I came to talk to you about leannán sídhe, hoping you’d know more than other people I’ve been bumping into, lots of whom have given me little bits of information, but nothing all that actionable.”

“Sure sure, I owe you that much for free anyway,” Digger said, shifting his jacket back onto his shoulders. “You mind if we ditch this place while we talk, though? It’s dead here anyway.”

I chuckled a little bit, hearing the album hit a few seconds of silence before spinning up and starting all over again. “The less time I have to spend listening to this shit, the better.” We were in the elevator before anyone really had a chance to catch Digger leaving the party, which was probably for the best, as most of the times he wanted to duck out, someone usually came up to him with some last-minute request for a hook up, which inevitably turned into a longer conversation, one that Digger had trouble getting himself out of.

“You’re not coming by for my skills as an Apothecary, Druid. So what do I owe the honor of the visit?”

“Saoirse Staire,” I said to him as the elevator began its slow descent down to the ground floor. “Name ring any bells?”

“You know it does,” he said to me with a wry smile. I relied on the fact that Digger never forgot a name or a face a lot, but it was part of the reason he’d *gotten* Protected Status in the first place. “She wasn’t a client for any of the hard stuff but she liked a little bit of the party drugs – Pixie Bliss, Wraith Euphoria – but she hasn’t been around much over the last couple of years. Although I did see her about a month ago. She wanted something different than my usual orders, so it took me a little bit to mix it up for her. It wasn’t the sort of thing I keep on hand, generally.”



“What’s that?” I asked as the elevator dinged and we both walked out into the lobby.

“Alexandrium,” Digger said to me.

I frowned a little bit at that. “The memory restorer? Yeah, I can imagine that’s not the sort of thing you need to keep in your usual bag of tricks. She say what it was for?”

Digger rolled his eyes at me. “You should know better, Dale. I don’t ask. She was willing to pay to get it faster than normal even, so I went home, brewed up a batch and met her the next day for delivery and payment. Haven’t seen her since then, so I assume whatever she wanted it for was concluded.”

“Nothing more since then?”

Digger shrugged, shaking his head. “If I haven’t seen her, Dale, I haven’t seen her. Anything else I can do for you?”

I sighed, shaking my head. “Not unless you happen to know anything about some rogue Atlantean lingering around the city,” I muttered as I started to walk away from him.

“You mean Nigel?”

That stopped me in my tracks, as I spun on one heel and started walking back towards him. “You *know* an Atlantean?”

“Well, sure, Nigel’s in town. He typically blows through every couple of years for a few months and then disappears back on the winds again like a tropical storm.”

“I thought none of the Atlanteans could get past the Veil and into our world,” I said, stepping in close so that we weren’t having the conversation with everyone in the lobby. “Am I wrong in believing that?”

“There’s about a dozen who can cross the Veil back and forth, and they’re mostly travelers, so they don’t tend to stay in one place for too long,” Digger said. “Besides, Nigel’s good people. He looks out for others, sort of like you do.”

An Atlantean with a habit of coming and going in my city and I didn’t know about it? More importantly, Dad hadn’t known about it, and my sister didn’t either. I didn’t care for that one bit. Keeping secrets from the Druids was an inherently bad idea, but it didn’t seem like Digger had *realized* it was a secret, so I decided to let him off without so much as a warning. “Yeah, okay. Well, thanks for the info, Digger. You continue to prove useful, as always. Don’t go getting nibbled on by any strangers before you see me next, yeah?”

I headed over towards Buster’s, figuring I’d get a cheesesteak and head back to the apartment. I don’t always spend all my time in the city – I’ve got a house over in El Cerrito that doesn’t see as much of me as it would like – but at least half the time, I’ve found it’s easier just to crash in the apartment than head back to the house.

If you’ve been to San Francisco and skipped Buster’s, I don’t know what to tell you other than you’re doing it wrong. They’re a goddamn institution at this point, open until about 2:30 am most nights, which might sound like an odd time point, but the bars and the strip clubs close at 2, so whenever people are at their neediest and most vulnerable, the promise of a warm, hot sandwich is awaiting just around the corner. It’s sort of genius if you ask me. And what’s funny is that the food didn’t have to be all that good, because of the opportunity benefits, but instead of being *good*, they went for fucking *amazing* instead. So

even people who *aren't* hanging around for the close of bars swing by, because it's the best food you can get. Sure sure, there's other *good* places to get a cheesesteak here in the Bay – the Cheesesteak Shop does fine ones, and so does Ib's – but if you want the best, accept no substitutes.

After I'd got my food, though, I usually didn't want to hang around, so I headed back to the building, making my way through the darkened halls up to my apartment above the wine store, flipping on the television to watch last night's Late Night With Stephen Colbert off my DVR when there was a buzzing at the back door to the building, my private entrance, meaning someone looking for me personally and not just hassling random doorways.

I grumbled, but then moved over to the CCTV camera screen I had by the buzzer. I was more than a little surprised to see Sirena Greznov, Bay Area Local Hunt Captain for the Succubi, looking up at me, heavy annoyance plain as day upon her face. I was more than a little surprised she'd gotten to my place so fast, and then, just before I was going to buzz her in, she leaned a little, and I could see she wasn't alone, with a couple of figures behind her.

"Gods, and I thought I was done with business for the day." I pressed the button to unlock the door to the stairs, which would let them come up and to the apartment. A few moments later, there was a knock on the door, so I moved to open it, and Sirena just marched right on, followed by two other familiar faces.

Sirena Greznov was more than easy on the eyes, a platinum blonde who looked like she was from Sweden or Norway or maybe some part of Russia where they grew them big and busty, but with a very youngish face. That was entirely by design, obviously. A lot of people remarked how much she resembled Taylor Swift. That was by design as well. She was dressed in a scanty black slip of a dress that looked like it was barely more than a suggestion of fabric. "You can be a real pain in my ass, Gunslinger," she said as she walked over towards my couch and sat down on it, making herself comfortable. "I'd rather you'd have put her down, honestly."

That was when I noticed the second person entering was Navya, who I'd nearly put in the ground just a few short hours ago, dressed just as she was then, although her face had a very frightened look upon it, as she realized exactly how openly the Local Captain was talking about my ability to murder her.

"Yeah, well, that would've put an even bigger toll in your ledge, 'Rina, and that's the last thing you'd have wanted," I said. "Think of how much a soul's weight would've cost you."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Sirena grumbled, as I glanced to see the third woman slipping in, and it was my turn to feel my heart drop a little bit as I saw someone who had no reason to be in my living room.

"Hey Gwen," I said to the third succubus. "What're you doing here?"

Gwen Nighttears and I had a very complicated history to say the least. In between bouts of making each other miserable, we'd had a few good spells of making each other extremely happy as well. She had a lineage I'd never been able to understand, a strange combination of Asian, Scottish and Spanish features all rolled into one – red hair, almond shaped eyes and a tanned skin that still somehow bore an immense number of freckles upon it. She was dressed in a short tartan pleated skirt and a white button-up Oxford shirt that told me she'd probably been out working tonight up until literally the worst possible things had gone down. "Navya's my fucking cousin," she sighed. "I told her when she said she was coming over for a visit that first thing, *first thing* she had to do was come talk to Sirena, to pick up the No Fly list and get the lay of the land."

“I was *hungry*, cousin,” Navya whimpered.

“Navya, shut the *fuck* up,” Sirena spat. “You didn’t just try and feed on someone on the No Fly list, you tried to exert your will against the literal fucking personification of Justice around these parts. I’ve seen some truly stupid fucking first moves, but trying to eat on the man who’s authorized to destroy your *soul* for doing so? Do you have any idea the fucking debt you’ve rung up in just a few hours?”

“It can’t be—”

“Shut the fuck *up*, Navya, unless you want me to keep raising your portion of this fucking debt crater you’ve thrown us into.”

The succubus fell deathly silent at that. Maybe it was dawning on her just how deep the hole she’d been digging was already getting, or maybe Sirena’s attitude was convincing her that I still had the option of murdering Navya on the table, which technically, I did.

“You want to tell me what you’re doing here, Sirena?”

“Settling up our score,” Sirena said before glancing over at Gwen. “Go on, strip down.”

“Hey wait a *minute*—” I started to say.

“One of us fucks up, we all pay the price,” Sirena grumbled. “You know the Predator Accords better than I do, Gunslinger, so you should’ve expected this.”

“It allows the debt to be *distributed* but that doesn’t make it *mandatory*, ‘Rena.”

“It’s the Hunt Captain’s discretion, and the last thing we’re doing is underpaying this debt.”

Gwen had stood up and shed the top, leaving her perky young tits exposed to my eyes. I, rationally, *knew* they weren’t as young as they appeared, but Gwen had always had a knack for knowing how to target whatever a man liked that he hadn’t indulged in for the longest of times, and apparently I’d been skewing towards older women lately. When she dropped the skirt, she had a nice generous patch of red curls above her pussy, her arms folded behind her back, her head tilted to one side, like she almost couldn’t look me in the eyes.

“Bringing a pair of succubi to my doorstep isn’t exactly paying off the debt, ‘Rena and you know that,” I scolded, although it was *damn* hard not to let my eyes keep drifting back to Gwen’s naked form standing in the middle of my living room.

“We’re not going to engage in a feeding, Dale,” Sirena sighed at me, like I was being deliberately dense. “We’re going to engage in a filling.”

“Oh. *Oh!* I’m not particularly injured right now, though.”

When I was young, my interest in the Predator Accords ran deep. How, I remember asking my father, could we let people hunt humans? His response was that the predators paid their price of admission like anyone else, and we prevented them from ever taking things too far. While succubi were known for their nature of feeding on humans, they could also *reverse* that process, engage in a filling, a transfer of vitae back *into* a human. They were typically used in cases of emergency healing or to repair the sort of catastrophic injuries that might otherwise be debilitating.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re getting one filling now, and each of the three of us owes you one more filling in the future, to be reclaimed at a point of your choosing,” Sirena said, moving to sit on the left

side of my couch, Navya on the right, as Gwen turned around and kneeled in the middle of it. “I could feel how *tangible* your anger was when I walked in tonight, and you’d better take all that out on Gwen here, so her cousin sees just how close she came to getting her light snuffed out.”

Gwen glanced over at me, and motioned for me to come closer, reaching up to caress my face, whispering quietly, “What memory did she use?”

I winced, tensing up a little bit, before I whispered back, “She used Jen’s scent.”

A single tear dropped from Gwen’s eye before she looked over at Navya, shaking her head. “You useless *bitch*,” she sneered. “I wish he’d just fucking *killed you instead*.” Gwen reached an arm up and wiped the back of her hand against her eyes. She knew exactly how deep the dagger Navya had driven into my heart had been in that moment. Then she looked back to me once more. “Make it hurt, Dale. You have the right to be angry, so fucking use me the way she needed to be treated.”

There wasn’t any way to get out of this other than to get through it, so I moved to get behind her, pulling my cock out, knowing that what we were about to do wasn’t much in line with how Gwen and I had done this back before we’d agreed not to do it anymore. But the expectations had been set, and if I didn’t play my part, it would only get worse a thousandfold for both Gwen and Navya.

My hips thrust forward, pushing my shaft into her pussy, and she let out a carnal moan, looking over her shoulder at me with almost a sneer. “That the best you got, Gunslinger?”

I hated that we’d been roped into this, but here we were, so I grabbed a fistful of her copper curls and yanked back on them hard like the reins of a show horse, as I started to ram my cock into her with reckless abandon, making sure the tip of my shaft hit the back of her womb each time, her left hand holding onto Navya’s, her right holding onto Sirena’s.

Gwen and I had had sex several times before, but this was just raw carnal fucking, and as pleasurable as the signals being sent through my brain were, I also just wanted it done.

“Fuck me, Lord Gunslinger! Fuck my worthless pussy! Hammer your pleasure from me, so that we might redeem ourselves! Take from me which is rightfully yours! Slake your thirst from my whorish body! Savage me!”

When my orgasm finally crescendoed, I felt the oddest sensation as instead of feeling energy flowing *out* of me, I could feel it come flooding *into* me, like licking a livewire. A few seconds later, my cock slipped triumphantly from Gwen’s still throbbing and pulsating snatch, her body looking drained and weak, as she slumped forward onto the couch, the other two succubi looking far less shiny than they had when they’d entered.

“May we sleep here until morning, Gunslinger?” Sirena asked me.

“You and Navya may,” I said, scooping up Gwen into my arms. “Gwen will rest alongside me.”

As I started to walk towards my bedroom, Sirena called to me one last time. “Dale?”

“Yeah?”

“I truly am sorry it came to this,” she said, genuine regret on her face.

“Let the word of just how close Navya came to getting her soul extinguished tonight spread,” I said to her. “And we’ll hope it’ll doesn’t happen again.”

Fucking *tourists*.

## Chapter Five – “Good Hunting”

When I woke up in the morning, both Sirena and Navya were gone, but Gwen was still curled up in my bed, looking a bit more like her normal self. Most people don't know, but succubi take on aspects that those around them find appealing without them even knowing, albeit just temporarily. So when she's around me, the freckles become a bit more prominent, the red stands out a little more in her hair...

It's worth noting that Gwen and I have a pretty steady fuckbuddy relationship and have for several years now. We'd both agreed a few months ago not to fuck anymore, but I suspect we were both being optimistic in that assessment, since we've said that sort of thing before. We both know that neither of us sees anything good coming out of us wanting to take it long-term – she'd have to deal with all of the hassle that comes with being the partner of one of us two Druid positions (my sister as, as Hunt Mistress, has the same issue) and the fear of being constantly hunted as an attempt to get at me, and I'd have to deal with the mental hassle of doing she was constantly being intimate with other sentient beings of all stripes, just as part of her very basic nature. I think I might've been able to get past my hurdle if she'd shown any interest in trying to engage with hers and some compromise where she was still doing her thing and I was still doing mine was a possibility, but an extremely unlikely one, since neither of us wanted to make any changes to who we are.

I hopped into the shower, glancing at my phone to check the time, seeing it was just past 11 a.m., something I was entirely accustomed to. One of the ground rules Dad told me about being the Gunslinger was that I shouldn't get used to seeing a lot of sunrises, and if I did, I was probably going to see them on the wrong side of the day.

I felt absolutely amazing, which made total sense after what I'd gone through the night before. The amount of energy flowing through my body was going to keep me on a high for a few days, mostly because I was carrying around additional lifeforce tipped to me from the three succubi. It's a little hard to explain what it feels like, but there was an extra spring in my step, a sense that whatever I was about to do for the next day, I'd be doing it at 110%. Even the sensation of the warm water rolling on my skin felt more vivid than I'd ever felt before.

My apartment had been decorated extremely tastefully, and I loved my waterfall shower design, stone walls on two sides, and stone floors, with two glass walls on the other, one of which was a door. And after I'd been underneath the hot water for five or six minutes and the room was steamed up pretty good, I heard the glass door open behind me as Gwen slipped into the shower with me, sliding her arms around my waist. “You know, you'd probably have been doing me a favor if you'd executed my cousin last night.”

“Mmm,” I said, feeling her tits pressed against my back as I kept my head underneath the rush of water. “You don't want to be in that kind of debt to me, Gwen, believe me. She that much of a pain in the ass among the family?”

“They sent her here because she's always leaping before she looks, and her mom wants *me* to try and train her out of that, to get her to be savvier and more cautious,” Gwen giggled. “Clearly I'm doing a great fucking job at that, considering she almost got killed before I even knew she was in town.”

“That ain't on you, Gwen. If she's going to go about digging herself a grave, there's only so much blocking you can do to keep her out of it,” I said, as Gwen snuggled up against me, turning us both so she could share the hot water as it dripped down onto us.

“What're you working on these days, Dale?”

“Probably no big deal, but it’s a missing persons case,” I said, feeling Gwen’s hands massaging my body, not in any sexual way, but still in a comforting and familiar fashion. “The client’s a detective for the SFPD, and his girlfriend was faefolk and she’s gone missing.”

“That kind of thing happens all the time, Dale. Fae finds a mark, takes the mark and then vanishes like leaf on the wind once she’s got what she wanted.”

“Yeah, but this ain’t that,” I said to her. “I ruled that out almost immediately. The leannán sídhe in question was planning a wedding, and had even gone to the Queen to ask for permission to make the wedding official, so that’s a step beyond it being a quick short con.”

“She asked the Queen?”

“Yep, which is why it doesn’t seem likely it’s a dine’n’dash.”

“Impossible,” Gwen said as she started to take over soaping me up. “The Queen wouldn’t permit marriage for that kind of thing, so if she was asked and it was granted, there is *going* to be a wedding, unless this leannán sídhe is dead.”

“We’re not there yet, but it’s not out of the range of possibilities either. I’m hoping it doesn’t turn out that way, but she’s been gone a bit, and so far, I don’t have all that much of a trail to go off.”

“What have you got so far?”

“I got a detective who’s got a missing leannán sídhe fiancée, who’s apparently got an Atlantean mage looking out for him after he had a run in with a ghost wolf, but no motive for abduction, no sign of the missing girl, no sign of abductors, no point of capture that reveals force but hey, it’s San Francisco so who the hell knows what happens on our streets at night, right? I started with running down a handful of the usual players, shaking the trees, seeing who’s got any breadcrumbs I can get started with.”

“What did Seymour say?”

“Seymour gave me the Atlantean magician, which didn’t mean anything to me until I went to go see Digger, and Digger told me that there’s an Atlantean mage called Nigel who wanders out behind the Veil all the time and is currently in town.”

“I didn’t know Atlanteans ever came out from behind the Veil.”

“Me neither. I thought the dome was impenetrable, only to find out from fucking Digger of all people that there’s a small number of Atlanteans, about ten or so, who can cross through the goddamn dome at *will*. And what’s hilarious is he told me like he thought everybody fucking knew about it,” I said, shaking my head. “Trust Digger to not realize he’s sitting on a fucking megaton of a secret.”

“And yet, you’re telling me about it.”

“Yeah, because I know you aren’t giving shit like that away for free, Gwen, and you let your cousin know how easily I could’ve snuffed her out, and being well within my rights to do so, and that you thought the offense was bad enough that I *should’ve*, I don’t mind letting you have a little bit of useful information that you can keep in your back pocket.”

“What did you go to Digger for?”

“Leannán sídhes visit Digger for all sorts of things – party drugs, maskers, even magic flatteners, not that our girl went for any of that,” I said as Gwen put the bottle of liquid soap back on the shelf.

“So, bust other than the Atlantean then.”

“Now I didn’t say *that*,” I chuckled. “She was after Alexandrium, and Digger was the easiest person in town to score that off, even if he did have to take a couple of days to get it for her.”

“Don’t leannán sídhe usually want the *opposite* of Alexandrium?”

“Yeah, they’re looking to fog memories, not clear them up,” I said with a shrug. “So I’ve got a couple of threads to pull on, but neither of them makes a whole lot of sense.” I turned off the water and turned to open the door, reaching out to grab a couple of giant big fluffy towels.

“What about the cop himself?” she asked me as she took the towel from my hand.

“What *about* the cop?”

“You do your homework on him, or is he above reproach?”

I rolled my eyes a little bit. “Nobody’s above reproach.”

“*You* are.”

“The *hell* I am...” I laughed. “And my sister isn’t either. Nor was Dad. We all have secrets, Gwen; it’s just a question of knowing where to dig.”

“And where do I dig if I want *your* secrets, huh, Mr. Sexton?”

“You’re on the wrong continent for those, Gwen,” I said with a smirk. “Most of my secrets are squirreled away in all sorts of places thousands of miles away from here, under hundreds of feet of dirt where nobody’s ever going to look.”

“Any suggestions on where I should start looking?”

I shook my head. “None that I’m going to give you.”

“Then back to the cop,” she said, toweling her hair dry as best as she could. “Why did the leannán sídhe get caught up in the cop’s orbit in the first place? There’s no meet-cute in the world that would overcome the innate paranoia a member of the faefolk would have of local law enforcement.”

“Mmm,” I said, glancing at my cheeks, wondering if I needed to bother shaving this morning, deciding against it. “I’m not so sure of that. As of late, the line between the supernatural world and the mundane has gotten a lot more blurred. I know we’re big on keeping the general population unaware of the supernatural world, but I told my father growing up that sooner or later, it was going to be impossible to keep the whole thing under wraps. There’s just too many magical things in this world to keep the lid on it too much further.”

“I agree with you, Dale, but it’s not up to you and me, and you know that. The forty-nine Houses get to make that call, and they don’t seem to have any interest in letting Joe Q. Public see behind the curtain.”

“The only two dominoes people notice in a rally, Gwen, are the first and the last,” I said as I grabbed my boxers and pulled them on, followed by my pants. “We’ll see what the world looks like a few years’ time, whether or not the Houses even get to make that decision for themselves or if the public decides when somebody stumbles into something and nobody’s quick enough on the draw to cover it up.”



“I hope I’m right and you’re not, truth be told,” she said, grabbing her thong off from my living room, stepping into it, followed by the plaid skirt she’d shown up in. “I don’t like the idea of my business suddenly being something everyone in the world knows about. It’s already hard enough having to be picky about my client list but not so picky that I starve to death. If the whole world finds out what I do for a living, how the hell am I going to screen my clients then?”

“I imagine someone somewhere will make a service to help you do it,” I said. “That’s how all businesses get started. Shit gets too complicated or hot, and the middleman is thusly born.” I’d seen it happen in both worlds – magical and not – and while nobody ever *dreams* of being a middleman, it’s where the birth of new enterprises happen in all worlds. I walked over to my dresser and pulled the second drawer open, grabbing a Rival Sons tour t-shirt from within, tugging it down over my head.

“Deal with a lot of middleman, do you, Dale?” she asked me, pulling on the rest of her clothes from where they’d been strewn about my living room. “I can’t see you as the kind of person bickering with *anyone* about minute details. If someone gives you shit, you just plow in and handle them.”

After closing my dresser drawer, I slowly worked through the ornate puzzle locked box that rested atop of it, where I kept the SoulEnders when I wasn’t wearing them. In addition to the puzzle lock which made sure I was of sound mind and body, the box also couldn’t be opened by anyone other than the current holder of the title of Druid Gunslinger. I remember when I’d seen Dad open the box for the first time – I couldn’t have been more than five or six – and I asked Dad why the lock was even there if nobody other than him could open the box, and he’d told me there’d once been a Gunslinger who’d had someone take over their mind and had tried to use the SoulEnders for purposes they weren’t meant for. Because of that, the lock was developed, so that if our bodies were being driven by someone else, they couldn’t get at our most powerful weapons.

I hadn’t had to rely on that security measure yet, but Dad told me there was no shame in it if I had to and told me he’d needed to use it a couple of times during the course of his career.

That was the most important lesson Dad had taught me. Failure was inevitable, but that just meant it was something that could be learned from, improved upon and adapted to. It was life’s way of teaching hard lessons, and the most grievous offense was to refuse to learn them.

I took the two revolvers from their resting space, still snug in their holsters, sliding a shoulder holster over each arm, giving me a moment to fasten them into place, ready for a cross draw at a moment’s need. There was a comfortable and familiar weight to them,

“I’m not so uptight that I don’t see the need of middlemen, love,” I said. “In fact, I do a whole lot of information gathering off the back of middlemen. They’re one of my best sources of information. So I’m good to keep the middlemen industry around for as long as possible.”

“What’s your next step going to be then? Go after the Atlantean?”

“Not exactly sure where to pick that particular thread up, so I may have to do a bit of legwork, see if I can find anybody who knows this Nigel fellow. They probably don’t know he’s Atlantean, otherwise I’m *sure* my family would’ve known about it.”

Gwen smirked at me. “You don’t like being out of the know.”

“No, Gwen, I don’t like it,” I said. “The last thing the Gunslinger wants to be caught off guard because someone’s slipping through the cracks. And the idea that we’ve had Atlanteans crossing back and forth from behind the wall for who knows how long... that’s concerning.”

Gwen primped her hair a bit, making sure her outfit was in the perfect show off style, because she was likely going to be back on the prowl, trying to find someone to give her the energy she'd lost in infusing me with it the night before. While the three were supposed to have given me equal shares, I had a sneaking suspicion that Gwen had chipped in a little extra, out of guilt, considering her cousin had tapped into a very painful memory of mine in an attempt to get me to lower my guard.

One night, after a particularly brutal day for us both, Gwen and I had broken down crying in each other's arms and had just let all the shit and sludge of our lives come pouring out for the other to see, two people with highly evolved defenses just letting the other see us, warts and all, underneath the naked moonlight, passing no judgment, just acceptance and healing. But there was also a price that came with that level of trust, knowing someone out there understood where at least a few of your weak spots were.

It's complicated. We're complicated.

Life was simpler when I was younger and not quite as burdened.

"I shouldn't keep you from your hunt, Dale," she said as she kissed my cheek. "And while I would've been okay with you killing my cousin, I guess I'm a little glad that you didn't, even if she *is* an utter pain in the ass."

"Thanks for giving a shit, Gwen," I told her. "About me, and not just the job."

"Hey, if you were dead, who would I talk to?"

"Gwen, you're the friendliest person I know," I laughed. "If you can't find someone to talk to, what hopes do the rest of us have?"

She winked at me as she made her way to the door. "You'll make do, Dale." She was most of the way out of the door before she poked her head back in for one final statement. "Good hunting." And then she was out and gone and away and the room was a little less bright for it.

I'd had a thought when I'd been talking with Gwen about the mysterious Atlantean and realized that maybe I *did* have a thread end I could start pulling on. Atlantis was starting to feel like maybe it was more than just an indirect link to this mess, which meant maybe I should pay a visit to Claire DiMaggio, the Lady of Tides.

It can seem like we've got a representative for everything, but for as long as I've been paying attention to supernatural politics, the Atlanteans haven't had anyone to speak for them, and as such, the Lady of Tides has taken on the voice of speaking for them, making sure we're still generally respectful for their area of the globe, even if nobody can get in and out.

I mentioned the erection of the Veil there, and it's probably the greatest single spellwork our planet has ever seen. The reports are that Merlin wasn't seen in public for almost a decade after he built it, it had taken that much from him. The Veil is the reason why all the magic in the world doesn't get picked up on cell phones or traffic cameras. It's why the idea of Bigfoot seems so silly. It's why the almost impossible preponderance of evidence suggesting magic is real gets lost in the shuffle.

The Veil touches the mind of every person born on the planet and installs a sort of mental trap door, so that if you're out minding your own business some night and you happen to stumble across a vampire feeding on someone in a back alley, you'll convince yourself you just saw two people making out, and there was nothing supernatural about it.

I know *some* magic – every Gunslinger and Huntsmaster is required to be at least a rudimentary spellcaster – but the more time I spent studying the Veil, the more terrified of Merlin I got. It’s been said that the SoulEnders can kill anything on the planet, and that includes Merlin, but I’ve never wanted to put that to test. The few times I’ve met Merlin, he scared the shit out of me, and I don’t frighten lightly. Not because of what he did when I’d met him, but simply how he talked about things. The level of power him and Morgana Le Fay wield is beyond comprehension, meaning they just have a fundamentally *different* view on, well, *everything*. There’s big picture and there’s *ultra* big picture.

Anyway, because of all of that, when the Veil was constructed in 989, give or take (calendars get especially untrustworthy around that time frame, for reasons that I would think are obvious), the Atlanteans were permanently sealed in their bubble, away from the rest of the world and a small part of the Northern Pacific Ocean, about the size of Hawaii, just stopped existing. All the merfolk were trapped there but as such, someone needed to oversee the way all the other tribes were treating the oceans, and as such, the Leader of Tides position was created.

Sometimes it’s the Lord of Tides, sometimes, like now, the Lady of Tides. Claire had held the job for just shy of forty years now, so as such, she’d been a regular around many of the socials and parties held each year. But I’d rarely had the reason to visit her on a business call. There just isn’t much need for the dispenser of justice on the high seas all that often.

Her office was up near Fisherman’s Wharf, so it wasn’t going to be too far out of my normal path, assuming I could find the damn thing. You get close to Fisherman’s Wharf and it can be very easy to get lost or have trouble finding your way around. That’s not magic; that’s just the power of architecture at work.

Eventually, though, I located the building in question and made my way inside, but as soon as I got to the door of her office, I immediately began to get nervous, as there was a small stack of mail outside.

“Great,” I said before kneeling down to pick the lock. “Let’s see what’s behind door number one...”

As soon the door opened, I winced, because I knew that smell.

Dead bodies.

## Chapter Six – “Seems Too Ordinary”

You’d think that after my time spent running down mysteries and trouble, I’d have gotten used to the smell of corpses, but I don’t believe it’s a scent anyone can get used to. Nobody human, anyway. It’s a sort of rancid, acrid odor that cuts down to the bone marrow, pierces right into your soul as sharply as it can and reminds you of your own mortality in the harshest possible manner.

I’d grown up knowing how to recognize that smell. The first time I’d been exposed to it, I was five and my father had brought me along, deciding it was time that I started getting prepared for the potential paths before me. I just assumed that ‘bring your kids to work’ day was similar for everyone else and didn’t really learn better for a while longer.

As much as I would like to say that I was on high alert at that moment, to be completely frank, the smell of old, rotting flesh actually lowered my guard a bit. Between the stack of mail outside the door and the pervasive stink clinging to the air, I was certain that the bodies inside weren’t too recent, and that no killer could lay in wait for so long just of the off chance someone wandered by. Maybe, I remember thinking to myself, she died of natural causes, before openly recognizing what a dumb option that was to consider. People in our line of work so very rarely got that chance.

The thing I was most bothered by was that whoever was cleaning the building apparently had special orders to avoid Lady DiMaggio’s offices, otherwise the body or bodies would’ve been found by now, and this whole visit would be going very differently. I knew the Lady of Tides had many private aspects to her business that she’d want to keep from prying eyes, but to go so far as to not even have someone coming in to clean their offices? Well, that was a level of paranoia several steps beyond even me and my family.

Once I got the door open, I moved into the offices, using the sleeve of my jacket to flip the light switch on, and immediately knew that we weren’t looking at a simple break-in or a smash’n’grab, because the entire place had been ransacked, and I mean from top to bottom, papers scattered everywhere, drawers emptied... whoever had been searching through this place had been thorough, and they’d had plenty of time. Near the doorway was the body of Riggs Mulligan, the man who’d been Claire DiMaggio’s bodyguard, two bullet holes in his chest, center mass, and one in the head. He still had his weapon in his hand. It looked unfired.

I tried to disturb as little as possible as I made my way across the room, stepping around the pool of blood left by the body, heading towards the back of the office, where I found a second body, that of Claire DiMaggio herself, killed in much the same way, three shots to the chest and one to the head. More disturbingly, there was a spent pistol resting right next to the body. I suspected the serial numbers had been filed off the weapon and there wouldn’t be any DNA to pull off it, but there was something ballsy about just leaving the murder weapon there in the room. It almost felt like a statement, like “you can’t do shit, and here’s the proof.”

The next step was to do a clean sweep of anything magical from the offices, of which there shouldn’t be much. She would’ve had a different site for that kind of thing, something probably directly on the oceanfront. The only thing of any real importance in *this* office that *I* cared about was still hanging around Claire’s neck – the symbol of office for the Lady of Tides, a silver pendant with a large blue sapphire in the center of it. It was pulled to one side, as if someone had tried to lift the pendant off her, and had been unable to, almost trying to sell the robbery aspect of the whole encounter, but in fact, once the Lord or Lady of Tides had passed, all the people who could remove the symbol from around the body’s neck were spellcasters. Most of them, however, couldn’t choose a new successor. Very few people

could, which meant if they'd taken it from her body, they'd probably have ended up presenting it to me sooner or later. But since it was there, I'd have to pick and appoint a new Lord or Lady of Tides.

I'd have to ask Dad's memory box about how I would go about doing so, but I knew how to remove the chain and lift the pendant so I could take it with me. I pulled one of the SoulEnders from its holster, flipped a switch on its side to the null icon, crouched down, pointed the pistol at the chain of the necklace and pulled the trigger.

The SoulEnder belched a puff of dark red flame, and the necklace disappeared into nothingness, leaving just the pendant piece loose, which I picked up and pocketed it, making sure the SoulEnder's Spell Crusher setting hadn't done any other visible damage. It hadn't sparked, which it would've if there'd been any attempt to use piss poor spellwork to break the chain before. Confident my handiwork would go unnoticed, I stood back up and made my way back to the doorway.

Once I reached the doorway, I fished Detective Gao's business card from my pocket, then pulled out my cell phone, punching in his number.

Twenty minutes later, Gao and a number of uniformed officers showed up to cordon off the area, with crime scene forensics on their way. "You stomped all over my crime scene, Sexton?" He already had his notepad in hand, so I was guessing I needed to at least do a little bit of an interview before I'd be allowed to leave. Still, it was best to work *with* the cops whenever I could. I didn't need them mad at me. Of course, Gao didn't *feel* mad at me; it was almost like he was giving me shit because he felt obliged to because of the presence of the other officers. Lord knows the SFPD gets a kick out of giving me the stick.

"I walked in, over to the body in the back, and back out again," I admitted. "I wanted to be sure they were both dead, and I couldn't see Miss DiMaggio's body from the entryway. I also wanted to be certain that no one else was in the building while I waited for you to show up."

"How do you know the deceased?"

"Professional acquaintances," I told him. "We'd done a bit of business together in the past, although it's been a while." I lowered my voice a little, so that none of the beat patrol could hear me. "I'm actually here because of a possible link to your case."

Gao frowned at me, then nodded. "Alright. Would you say the deceased had any enemies?"

"That's a hard question to answer, Detective Gao," I told him. "If you're talking about things you could investigate, probably not a whole lot. If you're talking about things in *my* wheelhouse, then sure, there's plenty of people who she probably would've considered an enemy. Except none of those enemies would've been the kind of person who would've taken a swipe at her." I sighed, leaning my back against the hallway wall outside of the former Lady of Tides' office. "And this isn't how they'd do it, man. Pistol? Few in the chest and one in the head?" I shook my head. "This isn't my world, Detective. This is yours. It's too..." I gestured around the air, trying to conjure up the word I was looking for. "It's too fucking *ordinary* for my corner. My first instinct is that it was a robbery, or maybe tied to some of her actual earthly businesses, based on the state of the place."

"What makes you think it wasn't your world, other than the method of dispatch?"

"There was a specific item that wasn't taken, and if someone had come after her because of her position in my world, they would've either taken that item or destroyed it," I told him. "But they didn't. It was still there. I've taken it, and it was the only thing I've changed about the crime scene. Also, now that I think about it, if it were a hit from people in my world, this isn't where they would've done it, either. It

doesn't send the kind of message that I'd have expected from a rival in her field. And they didn't take the necklace, which I did."

Detective Gao frowned at me. "I'm not keen about you taking evidence from my crime scene, Sexton."

"Mmmm," I replied. "You've gotten lucky in your time with the SFPD in that you've never really dropped into my world the whole time, and now within a week, you've come to me for help and drafted a crime scene that I've called in. You'll have to get used to small shit like that when we're involved, me or my sister."

"Most of the force seems to think highly of your family, the ones that you've dealt with anyway, although some people say you're a harbinger of doom," Gao said.

"Yeah, well, nobody likes being confronted with shit they don't know or understand," I told him. "You need anything else from me here, or am I free to go?"

"Hmph." Gao looked into the room at the bodies as they were being photographed then back at me. "Not your world. How sure would you say you were?"

"Nothing's certain in this world until you've got proof positive, detective, but if I thought it was my world, trust me, I'd have handled the crime scene very differently. This just isn't our vibe."

"Fine. But before you go, while I've got you here, how's *my* case coming along?"

I chuckled, shrugging a little. "I could give you a situation update, but I don't think any of the details would mean anything to you. But I'm making progress in getting pieces to start understanding the whole picture, which I think is a lot more complicated than you probably know. I don't think your girl's dead, which is good news, but I don't have anything more than a hunch to back that up at this point. That and the fact there's a load of noise and chatter going on with this. Your girl was connected in my world, and she'd done the groundwork to make sure you two's relationship was on the up and up and had been approved by all the key players who might have a say in things. So I can rule out her family, at least the big players. That isn't to say they're all clean, but I think the Queen's not standing in your way."

"The Queen... of the Elves?"

"Well, not *all* elves," I said. "The west coast U.S. ones. There are several elvish kingdoms, but most of them are very territorial and don't like to intermingle or mix."

"And... she knows about me? This west coast Queen?"

"Your girl went to her to make sure your wedding would be okay, which is... well, it's not the kind of step I would expect from someone who was going to pull a runner, so that's good news for you. It's one option I can cross off my list."

"And any other progress?"

I scoffed a little with a smile, spreading my hands a little. "Hey man, I'm working wonders as fast as I can here, alright?"

"That's fair," Gao said. "But you know as well as I do that the longer someone is missing, the less likely they are to ever be found again."

“That’s not as true for my world as it is for yours, Detective, but I understand the concern, and I assure you, I’m doing everything I can as fast as I can.”

“Then what are you doing standing around here yapping with me for?”

I raised my hand and waved as I headed towards the stairs. “Message heard. Back to the hunt for me. You need anything else about this place, you know how to get ahold of me.”

“Yep, now go.”

I headed down the stairs, the elevator cordoned off by the cops, and made my way back out onto the streets of San Francisco. It was just approaching early evening, which meant I had plenty of options in what to pursue next, but the weight of the damn Tidestone in my pocket was weighing on me like I was lugging around a live grenade in my pocket. The last thing I wanted to do was to be hauling it around for days. That meant having to head up Sexton Estate to see dear old, departed dad.

I headed back to my building and headed to the garage on the ground floor. The weather was piss poor, so I decided against taking the motorcycle, instead opting for my little blue Mini Cooper. I’d taken some shit from my sister when I’d picked the car, but it was small, agile and could get around the San Francisco city streets without too much effort. I much preferred the Kawasaki bike next to it, but taking two wheels out in the rain was generally asking for trouble.

I headed across the Golden Gate bridge and twenty minutes later, I was driving out of the rain and into wine country. There’s something wild about the San Francisco Bay Area – drive more than twenty minutes in any direction, and you can be an entirely different selection of weather. So while it had been spitting rain in downtown San Francisco, only twenty miles north of the city I was witnessing a blossoming sunset as I drove up into a much less crowded part of the state. I could’ve taken the Bay Bridge and up through Vallejo to go a bit more direct of a route, but the traffic there is even more murder than it would be going through Novato instead, and I think it’s a prettier drive.

Even still, I was fighting commuter traffic much of the way, and it made me wish like hell I’d taken the bike, weather be damned.

Sexton Manor & Vineyards is over by Buena Vista, north of the Sonoma Raceway, and a little bit west of the central Napa Valley sprawl, nestled away in a hard-to-find corner of the map, behind several gates, fences and signs that say “Keep out” in an assortment of languages wide enough to cover two-thirds of the planet.

I pulled the Mini Cooper up to the first gate, with its twin guardians on duty, one for humanity, one for everyone else. The human guard walked up to me and then recognized me with a smile. “Hey there, Mr. Sexton,” he said to me. “Didn’t know we were expecting the pleasure of your company at the manor today.”

“Hadn’t planned on it, Joe, but the case takes me where the case takes me,” I said. Joe looked like a normal human man in his forties, his appearance meant to deceive, as Joe could kill five guys with nothing more than a paperclip. He was probably one of the most lethal humans on the planet, although at this point, I suppose, he wasn’t *just* human anymore. “But this one’s not even the case I’m working, just some collateral damage I stumbled across in the process of research. Is my sister around?”

“She’s away, but should be back soon, sir,” he said to me. “Do you want me to notify her of your presence here?”

I waved a hand. “If you see her where she gets back, you can mention to her I’m here, but don’t go calling her to tell her I’m at the Manor. It’s nothing all that serious.”

Joe looked up, and the stone gargoyle that rested atop the pillar on the other side of the guard booth nodded a little. “Will do. Kilroy says your car’s clear of anything beyond the usual shit you bring with you everywhere you go.”

I smiled at him, shrugging. “What can I say, Joe? I do love my toys and I don’t like going anywhere without additional weapons at the ready beyond my regulars.”

Joe lifted up the gate and waived me on through. I was actually a little glad to have had Kilroy scan the car and come up empty, because it meant I hadn’t picked up a magical tail at some point when my guard was down.

The car weaved up the pathway before reaching the manor properly, a Spanish villa nestled in the California hills, built centuries ago, just when people were starting to settle in the region. The Sextons had gotten here early, a chance to escape from oppressors and tyrants, an opportunity for them to start a new life, away from the palace and court intrigue they’d left behind.

Or so they thought.

Instead, they’d just traded one collection of overseers for another. But at least they’d found the tools they would need to carve their own fates on the way across the country.

The place was beautiful, well-maintained while still crawling with all sorts of magical traps and security features. The Manor actually had several buildings, the Residence, the Winery, the Garage... but I needed to visit the Library or the Archive, depending on who was talking about it, so I walked to the left of the manor, over towards the small, almost bunker like building off to the side, stepping up to the twin heavy iron doors at the front, reaching up and rapping the bottom of my fist against it in two quick thuds.

The door opened and a tall, slender, older female elf opened the door, her silver hair done in one large heavy braid that ran down to between her shoulder blades. “Oh! Master Sexton,” she said with her trademark wizened smile. “No one told me to expect you. After more knowledge regarding some obscure weakness or another?”

“Not this time, Gale,” I sighed. “I’m here to talk to the old man.”

“Ah, hopefully that will lift your spirits some.”

“Talking to a memory engram of my father’s never really cheered me up before, but I’ll try this time, Gale,” I said, patting her shoulder. “Just for you.”

She led me to the stairs, as we descended deep into the archives. The family memory crystals were kept deep underground, as they would degrade upon exposure to sunlight. Because of this, they were kept in very special chambers, only exposed to light when someone needed to interact with them. Charlotte had been known to spend days down here, interacting with all our ancestors, prying them for guidance, for knowledge, for insights into the world that had long since been lost. There were nearly twenty crystals, with ancestors going back nearly a thousand years.

“You haven’t been by lately to update *your* crystal, Master Sexton,” Gale said to me as she brought me down to the contact chamber. “You wait much longer, and I’m going to send Henry to drag you here for it. And you know how much fun Henry has when he gets to do that sort of thing.”



“Within the next few weeks, I promise you, Gale.”

“You have until the end of the month, otherwise—”

“Yes yes, Henry will come and drag me in by my thumbs. I’ve got it, Gale.”

“He does so love dislocating thumbs, Master Sexton.”

“I *hear you*, Gale.”

“As long as we have an understanding,” she said, as I sat down at the Recall Table. “Shall I send your father down?”

“Yeah, a’right, let’s get on with it,” I sighed.

Gale moved out of the room, closing the door behind her, because the information was for my ears and eyes only. The Recall Table is a nice simple wooden desk with a couple of circular brass rails leading out of one wall, a resting dip in the middle, and an exit path out of the other side that would return the crystal whenever a person was done with it. Behind that was a stand with three prongs to hold the crystal sphere in place, with a sigil behind it to bring it to life.

And, as expected, a few minutes later, the large blue crystal containing the essence of my father rolled into the room. So I picked it up and set it in the holder and traced my fingertip along the sigil, which began to glow and then it began to project light into the crystal and to the side of the desk, the image of my late father appeared.

“Hello son,” he said to me. “You’re looking well.”

I sighed. “That joke never gets funny, Dad.” It was hard coded into the crystal, but what I was looking at wasn’t my father’s consciousness – it was more like a collection of memories, thoughts and ideas, but there wasn’t any emotion behind it, and the impression couldn’t reason. And it *certainly* couldn’t make judgment calls about how I looked. But my father had worked hard to put a handful of planned responses into his crystal when dealing with me and my sister. “I’ve come to ask you, father, about the Lady of Tides, and how I go about appointing a new one, since the old one has been murdered.”

“Murder isn’t entirely a new development when it comes to the Lord or Lady of Tides, so there is precedent,” the pure green image of my late father said. “Do you have the Tidestone, or was it taken during the murder?”

“I have the Tidestone.”

“That is in your favor then, my son,” Dad’s image said to me. “If you have the Tidestone then it means it is up to you to choose either a new Lord or Lady of Tides. I never had that responsibility, so you may wish to get your grandmother to walk through her thoughts when she had to decide how to find a new one. You want someone who is strong and has excellent ocean ties, but not someone who will cause a horrific dust up.”

“How soon do I have to select a new Regent of Tides?”

“Three months, although I recommend you take no longer than thirty days, because the longer you wait, the more struggles you will get amongst the sea kingdoms.”

“What stops with no Regent in office?” My father began to list half a dozen things quickly and it was clear he was going to keep going until I raised my hand in a fist to make him stop talking. If only I’d

been able to do that when my father was alive. “Right. The longer it goes, the worse it gets. You could’ve just said that.”

“I don’t understand your statement.”

“Of course you don’t, Dad,” I sighed. “Of course you don’t. What’s the process of appointing a new Regent of Tides?”

“It’s as simple as hanging the Tidestone around their neck.” The image of my father looked at me and then started speaking again. “You also cannot appoint someone who already has a major magical position such as yourself or your sister. So don’t do that.”

“I’d guessed that much, Dad.” I wasn’t entirely sure if there was anything else I wanted to ask about the Lady of Tides, but there was something strange ticking in my mind, so I had to give it a go. “Dad, do you know anything about Atlanteans who aren’t trapped in Atlantis?”

The glowing green image of my father froze solid for a moment before starting to talk again. “While we don’t have any confirmed reports of Atlanteans who aren’t trapped behind the Veil, there are *unconfirmed* reports of a handful of rogue wizards who may have found some way to sneak out of the Frozen City. We’ve been keeping tabs and writing reports for decades, but nothing we can prove. If you need to read those reports, they’re in the Surveillance section of the archives.”

“Huh. Is there any reason Charlotte and I wouldn’t have been briefed about that?”

“The world is full of rumors, son. You needn’t be briefed on all of them.”

“Thanks dad. Good seeing you.”

“Find a nice girl and settle down, son. I’ll see you again soon.” And *that* message was always his sign off, although I’ve always wondered if I got married if it that would change. Not that I expected to see it any time soon.

I picked up the crystal and dropped it on the other side of the rail, watching it roll down the rails and into the tunnel in the wall, leading it back to Gale, who would put the crystal in the place in needed to be stored. I stood up from the desk and headed to the door, heading out of the Archive, heading back up along stairwell, heading back to the surface.

When I set foot outside, before I even saw her, I heard the familiar voice of my sister Charlotte. “Talking to Dad, little brother? You must *truly* be stumped.”

My sister looks so deceptively innocent upon first glance that it was easy to see why so many people underestimated her at their own peril. She was barely a few inches over five foot tall, thin and slender, dressed in generally high fashion, her blonde hair hung loose in waves down to her shoulders. Today she had on black slacks that clung to her toned legs, but disappeared into thigh high black leather boots, a loose red silk blouse with a black leather vest on over it. And, naturally, she had the Huntmistress’s blade in its scabbard hanging from her belt. Many a man (and woman) had been drawn in by those soft brown eyes of hers, and if she and I were to compare body counts in the bedroom, I think it would be more than her being older than me that would give her a huge edge. I do fine with the ladies, but Charlotte, shit, Charlotte can pretty much get anybody she *wants* and often *has*.

“Ha ha, sis,” I said with a chuckle. “I was here to see about how to appoint a new Regent of Tides.”

“What happened to the one we used to have?”

“She found herself a bullet.”

“That seems less than ideal.”

“Ya think?”

“Any idea what led to her being shot?”

I shrugged a little bit. “My guess is problems from not-our-world,” I told Charlotte. “Gunshots. Ransacked office. All seems too ordinary to be mixed up with us.”

My sister nodded. “You’re looking good, little brother. Gwen said you were.”

“Keeping tabs on me, are we?”

“I’m your sister, Dale. Family looks out for one another.”

“I’m *fine*, Char.”

“Keep telling yourself that, little brother,” she said as she stopped leaning on my car, stepped forward and headed into the Archives. “We’ll see which one of us believes it first.”

## Chapter Seven – “What We’re Calling ‘Penancewear’”

I wish that anytime I took a case that all the rest of the daily shit that goes on in day-to-day living would simply drop by the wayside and I could just focus on whatever it was I was working on exclusively. Sadly, life, as always, had different plans in mind for me, and nobody ever lets me just concentrate when there’s rough shit on my plate I’m trying to work through.

This is all to point out that when my cell phone rang and Bad Penny’s name popped up on my caller ID, I should’ve been expecting some kind of chaos to have dropped in my life before this, but BP’s just the sort of usual nonsense that comes with everyday work weeks.

I get a call from BP about once or twice a season, so often so that she has me on retainer, but I offered her that retainer rate with one very specific caveat in place. If the problem is of BP’s own making, I charge her an additional day’s work, quite often in addition to hazard pay. That’s *slowed* the amount of calls she makes to me every year, but certainly hasn’t *stopped* them any. And I end up collecting on those surcharges about half the time my phone rang with her name on it.

Penny Crowley (yes, unfortunately, of *that* lineage) was one of San Francisco’s best known necromancers, a particular stripe of magic I was never keen to get entangled with, but she certainly had her uses, and I’d been known to knock a season or so off her retainer any time I had to enlist her skills, but the relationship was far more in her favor than it was mine. You’d think it hard for someone who spends most of their professional time talking to the dead to accumulate seriously threatening enemies, but BP was simply *that* good (or that *bad*, depending on how you looked at it) at selecting her clients.

I’d told her time and time again that the slightest amount of research would’ve probably cut down her problem intake by half, but she insisted that it would also slow her income by sizably more, and that wasn’t something she could afford to do, mainly because BP also had a gambling addiction and was known to run up the ledgers of any bookie daring enough to take her bets.

(When bookies came to collect on BP, I’d buy her more time, but I’d never once allowed her to skip out on a marker. Debts that were owed would be paid, one way or another, otherwise how could I expect her to pay her debts to *me*? To date, she’d always made good on her ledgers...eventually. I wasn’t particularly keen to find out *how*.)

“Penny, I hope whatever you’re calling about is serious, because this isn’t exactly a great time,” I said into my cellphone, praying like hell it was just a butt dial.

“Dale, dear boy, I never call for anything less than the most vital of crises,” she says to me, her voice that of a schoolmarm disliking the line of questioning from one of her pupils. “Besides, you’ll at least find this one interesting. I think I’m being followed by a pirate.”

“Oh come *on*, Pen,” I grumbled. “Who am I, Benjamin Hornigold? It’s 2012. How the hell are you being followed by a pirate?”

“I don’t think it’s a *living* pirate, Sexton,” she hissed at me. “I think it’s a ghastr, a ghostly pirate tied to some gig I did a few years ago.”

“A few years ago?” I said to her. “Why the hell would it be after you *now* then?”

“I don’t know! I can’t think of anything I’ve done that would’ve incurred a pirate’s wrath! But I’m being followed by something undead in a conquistador’s outfit!”

“Is it a conquistador or is it a pirate, Penny? They’re two entirely different things.”

“I don’t know the difference, Sexton, but in either case, I’ve got you on retainer to keep me safe from these sorts of things.”

“Fine, fine,” I grumbled. “Where are you?”

“Downtown, just about a block away from The Punch Line.”

“The hell are you doing out in the financial district this time of night?”

“I was on a consult! Completely unrelated! Now get your ass over here!”

“Alright, alright, I’m about twenty minutes out.”

“*Twenty minutes?*” she shrieked at me.

“I’m over at Ocean Beach, Penny,” I told her as I started walking in from the sand, kicking loose bits of grit from between my toes. “Besides, you don’t sound like you’re under immediate threat.”

“Isn’t the park closed this late at night?”

“Who’s lecturing who now?” I asked her, stepping over to the public footwash station, running my feet under the water to get them clean before sitting down and pulling on my socks and boots.

“You’ve got to have more than this for me to go on. A ghostly pirate or conquistador that *might* be related to a case you worked on years ago? Sounds so flimsy you couldn’t put a sticker on it.”

“Just come and cover my ass, Gunslinger! That’s what I pay you for!”

She hung up on me before I could gift her with one of my witty repartees, which meant Penny was genuinely quite nervous about what was going on, and that I needed to find her relatively quickly. I’d taken the Kawasaki over to the beach, so at least that was in my favor, although I was starting to reconsider the validity to my sister’s idea that I should have a griffon on call in case I needed to move across the city even faster than this.

I hopped on my bike and started tearing through the streets of San Francisco like a screaming demon cutting through the foggy night air. One of the reasons I loved San Francisco was the fog, which the Bay Area had affectionately named Karl a few years back. It provided the perfect cover for people like me to move about at night without prying eyes causing all sorts of problems. People can *think* they saw all sorts of things happening within the visual obscurity of the fog, but nobody really knows for certain. Also, late at night San Francisco is something of a ghost town, with literally nobody in it.

See, San Francisco’s a commuter town, so when the sun goes down, the population of the city plummets like you wouldn’t believe. That means it’s much easier to get away without being spotted, because the buildings you see all around you are mostly empty, or at least they are in stark contrast to how they are during the day.

Because of this, my bike can go a lot faster than it’s supposed to, although it does have a tendency to leave a single flaming tire streak in its wake when I deploy the hellfire thrusts. I don’t mind. It makes me look much more badass than I really am. It’s another trick I picked up from my father. The appearance of being threatening is just as important as actually *being* threatening. It wasn’t enough just to be *capable* in a position like ours – you had to remind people of what you could do (and *would* do) every now and then. You had to make sure people were *scared* of you when you wanted them to be.

I cut across the city, leaping off one hill when I crested it, leaving an arc of fire behind me as I ripped through the night fog, sending denizens of the night scattered like terrified cockroaches. Nobody wanted to get in my way. They all knew better.

When I get into the Financial District, the whole place is deader than any graveyard or a policeman's birthday party. The ground floors of the buildings were lit up, but everything's closed, and all of the buildings are actually empty, nary a soul to disturb me in my work. There's something eerie about a highly lit area with nobody around.

I say 'nobody,' but that clearly wasn't the case because I could see a handful of shadows sprinting away in different directions. Now, I knew most of these weren't problems, but it still could've been any of these people who were in the pursuit of my client.

I keep a tracking spell on all my regular clients, but they aren't long range, so I just need to get close enough and I can figure out where the hell they're hiding. This particular spot had a couple of second floor pedestrian bridges around with walkways beneath them and that meant they were premiere hiding spots for Penny, who always seemed to think elevation ensured security. There was a gossamer trail of silver faerie dust, the kind I use to indicate my clients' location.

For a few seconds, I let my eyes sweep the area, making sure there wasn't anything I was missing, then I used a LiftFoot spell to let me quickly climb through the air, stepping on invisible platforms that sparked beneath my feet as I moved to stand on the bridge.

The area looked empty.

I knew all too well that it wasn't.

My hand passed through the air and the veil Penny had thrown up in a hurry stripped away like so much useless magic, revealing her form bundled up in a tiny ball, looking up at me with an intense sense of relief on her face. "Jesus, Gunslinger!" Penny said to me. "It fucking took you long enough!"

Penny Crowley had never had the best sense of fashion, looking more like a Victorian era schoolmarm than someone who lived in modern San Francisco. She appeared to be in her sixties, but I knew far better than anyone how appearances could be utterly deceiving. Her hair was mostly grey with black streaks in it, her makeup overdone and excessive by any stretch of the imagination. Her outfit was layers upon layers, and I was more than a little certain that there were petticoats in some of them. She had rings on all her fingers and enough necklaces hanging around her neck to weigh down a small horse. She reeked of bad taste in magic and even worse judgment.

"Penny, shut the hell up a minute," I said to her, glancing around her, my hand reaching to pull one of the SoulEnders from its holster, feeling its familiar weight in my hand once more.

The act of drawing one of the SoulEnders had gotten to be an action I was far more comfortable than I was comfortable *with*. It wasn't a weapon anymore; it was an extension of me. I knew how to use the weapon to do any number of things, many of which weren't even the primary function of a weapon.

Because the SoulEnders were far more than simple weapons.

Almost no one understood that.

With a flick of my wrist, the gun in my hand started eating up loose magics. There was a swirl towards the end of the barrel. The SoulEnders fed anytime they were used, but this feeding ability could

be used to strip away all concealment magics in an area. I hadn't been entirely sure I'd find any, but there, just down against one of the lampposts, I saw a figure starting to take shape. Across the street, against the side of the building, there was another concealment being torn asunder, but it wasn't large enough to conceal a figure, so I assigned it second priority in my mind.

As the veil was ripped free, I saw that Penny wasn't *entirely* out of her mind, but it also wasn't at all what she'd told me it was.

It wasn't a pirate or a conquistador; it was a goddamn *jester*.

"Byron, is that you?" I said, pointing the SoulEnder at the scrawny figure in the jester's costume.

"Yeah! Don't shoot, Dale! It's me! It's me, Byron!" the elf shouted my way, his hands raised to indicate his surrender. "It's just your old pal Byron Oldbarley! Just here doing my job, that's all!"

"Byron, get the hell up here and explain yourself, will you?"

"Dale, I—"

"Byron, don't fuck with me tonight, okay?" I sighed, keeping the SoulEnder pointed his direction. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I'm working, Dale!" The jester leaped up from the street onto the pedestrian foot bridge and I could get a good look at him. It was clearly a jester's costume and not, as Penny had claimed, some kind of pirate. There were curls on the feet that ended in bells, and the hat had another four sets of bells hanging off it. The colors were garish, even for San Francisco, large patches of different shades, greens and purples mostly. "What do you think of the outfit?"

"I think you look like a goddamn idiot, Byron," I told him. "But okay, I'll bite. What's with the jester's costume?"

"It's a jester's costume?" Penny asked me.

"Quiet, Penny," I told her.

"It's an enchanted bit of what we're calling 'penancewear,'" Byron said to me, beaming with pride. "The idea is that it's meant to evoke the spirits of your ancestors, in order to get the person I'm following to be more likely to pay their debts."

"How do they *know* it's tied to a debt they owe?" I asked him.

"I show up and tell the debtor that they're going to be followed by their ancestors until they pay their debts, Dale," Byron laughed. "Of course I do. Otherwise the whole thing wouldn't make a lot of sense, would it?"

"And Penny Crowley is indebted to...?"

"Bill Travolta. Same as always."

I glanced over at Penny, who was making her way to her feet indignantly. "You made no such claims to me, sir!" she yelled at Byron, gesticulating wildly at him with one finger. "And certainly no such mention was made of... of... THAT!"

Byron sighed, shaking his head as he reached to his belt, grabbing what looked like a piece of doll furniture. He set it down on the ground, waved his hand over it, and the furniture grew from doll size to human size, before the elf moved to open the third of four drawers, looking through the files before settling on the one he was looking for. He pulled a stack of papers out, setting it atop of the row of files, opening a folder before unfurling a scroll about as long as my arm. “This is your signature on a document informing you that you were to be ‘disturbed magically’ until you have settled your debt, in full, with Lord Bill Travolta, head proprietor of Travolta’s Trials & Tribulations. You can quite clearly see it here at the bottom, Lady Crowley,” Byron said, tapping the bottom of the scroll with one of his long fingers.

It was my turn to sigh and shake my head. “Penny, what did I tell you about calling me to come scare off creditors for you?”

“This one didn’t seem like a creditor, Sexton!” she yelled. “It looked... it looked...” She glanced over at Byron, who was *impossible* to take seriously in that outfit at close quarters. “He looked much scarier than that!”

“Any last words from the defense?” I asked Byron, at this point more amused by the whole thing than bothered by it.

“She was warned in advance, she *signed* her acknowledgement of said warning, and the outfit is *supposed* to create a sense of general discomfort,” Byron laughed. “She’s *late* on payments that *she* agreed to make. By the terms of the accord, we aren’t allowed to actually *hurt* her, but we are well within our rights to make her life as uncomfortable as possible. That’s the way the accreditor’s clause has read since your father agreed to it decades ago, and I’m clearly operating within the agreed upon boundaries, causing the client discomfort without in any way giving her any real threat.”

“What’s with the jester’s outfit?”

Byron shrugged a little bit. “It was the last one Catalina had in stock, so I figured, everyone’s only going to see the haunting ancestors anyway, so what do I care what I look like when I’ve got it on?”

“Didn’t foresee conversations with authorities, despite the fact that you’re in the debt collection gig?”

“It’s within the permits!” Byron said a touch defensively. “When you’re delinquent on payment, we’re not supposed to make your life easier! We’re supposed to annoy you to the point where you just want to pay to make it stop! My appearance is not on trial here.”

“I mean, as ridiculous as he looks, the elf makes a fair point,” I said with a chuckle. “You’re in debt, Penny, and you *did* agree to endure this sort of behavior until you paid up. You also had every right to ask Byron to identify himself.”

“I did!” Penny shouted at me.

“She did not,” Byron said. “Or if she did, it wasn’t in English. I’ve got all my encounters recorded on GoPro if that’s needed.” He tapped the little square camera he had clipped to his chest. Byron, like most of the magical credit enforcers in California, was meticulous in making sure his ass was covered. “She was shouting a lot of Latin my way, but it’s all Greek to me.”

“That joke wasn’t funny the first dozen or so times you made it, Byron.” I nodded quietly. “That’s in line with the accords, though. If you weren’t demanding he identify himself in English, that’s on you, not on him.”



“But Dale—”

“Don’t ‘but Dale’ me, Penny,” I told her. “This has to do with a debt you owe. You know what that means. This isn’t within the terms of the contract regarding your protection, and as such, you’ll be getting an invoice for incidental services invoked. If you don’t want to be bothered like this, either pay your debts on time or stop making such stupid fucking bets in the first place!”

“But the Super Bowl—”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Penny,” I said, shaking my head. “Next time, I’m going to start stacking fees, so you’d better get your shit together, for your own sake, otherwise I’m going to end up taking that nice house of yours in lieu of my fees. I’ve always wanted a house near the Palace of Fine Arts.”

Penny glared at me, but knew enough not to talk back, especially when she’d put me in a foul mood. She nodded, accepting her fate. The last thing she wanted was me to zero out her options and null her contract, leaving her unprotected. “I’ll... I’ll be better. Sorry, Gunslinger.”

I tucked the SoulEnder back into the holster and moved over to the rail, hopping over the side of it and falling down gentle to the ground below, my natural featherfall spell baked into my boots making sure I descended gracefully, leaving Penny and Byron to work out the last of their differences.

Despite the fact that I’d been focusing on Byron’s pursuit of Penny, he wasn’t the only thing I’d stumbled across tonight. Against the building across the street, there’d been another concealment spell I’d stripped away, and I needed to go see what sort of magical debris I’d stumbled across.

The space that had been concealed by the spell wasn’t large, no more than a foot and a half on each side, and in that space, I saw something I certainly hadn’t anticipated running into. A Bhatt Box.

Nobody really knows the origins of the Bhatt Boxes. They’re named after Patel Bhatt, the first one to discover any of them, almost a thousand years ago in Anhilwara, India. There are probably a thousand of them scattered around the world, although that count could be off by an order of magnitude in either direction. Nobody knows what they’re for or what they do, exactly, but they make a lot of very smart magicians very, *very* nervous, because they run on the magical equivalent of a nuclear reaction, a Hand of Glory.

If you aren’t familiar with a Hand of Glory, let me enlighten you. First, you need to hang a man. The most powerful Hand of Glories are from dead murderers who have been hung, but it really only needs to be a criminal of some kind. After you’ve hung the criminal, you have to lop off one of his hands, usually the left, unless it was a murderer, in which case you want ‘the hand that did the deed,’ which can be harder to deduce than you might first think. You also want to drain some of the fat from the body, because you’re going to make a candle with it later. Then you dry and pickle the hand. At the end of all of this, depending on how well you’ve followed the rituals involved, you’ve created a magical battery with a power somewhere between ten sticks of dynamite and a thermonuclear warhead.

They’re stable, they’re strong and they aren’t volatile, all of which are things in their favor, in terms of using them to power long-term, freestanding magical projects, as long as they aren’t damaged or disturbed too much, either of which can result in all sorts of problems.

The Bhatt Boxes are ornately carved wooden boxes, bound in heavy iron and silver, that are left beneath heavy enchantments, scattered around the world, almost always in major cities. We *think* they’re gathering information of some kind. Maybe they’re designed to do long-form or long-scale calculations or research, but as far as we can tell, they don’t emit any signals, they don’t ever report *back* to anything.

Also, while we've never been able to successfully open one without damaging the contents, we can't seem to find any data storage inside of them either. And they don't seem to affect the area around them.

We don't know who put them where they are. We don't know how many of them there are. We don't know where almost *all* of them are. We don't know how long they've *been* there. We don't know who built them. We don't know if they've ever been moved. We can't tell if they're ancient spellwork or something relatively modern. The first one we know of was discovered in the year 1127 in the city of Anhilwara, India, and it looked a little old at the time, but we're almost *certain* there were dozens, if not hundreds, already in play long before that. In fact, the only thing we *do* know is that when they're removed, usually another one shows up somewhere else in the same city. But even that's not fully confirmed, since the concealments on the Bhatt Boxes are top notch, and generally only get removed by the sort of industrial grade magic destroyers as the SoulEnders and things on their general power scale.

So what the hell *are* they?

Fuck if I know, but I also know that destroying them can be incredibly bad luck, so I didn't have any desire to do that, and I don't even *believe* in luck.

I made a note of the exact location of the Bhatt Box, because the location of it was valuable intel, and then I pulled my cellphone out to call Disappearing Dwayne, tapping his name on my contacts list and preparing to get an earful.

"Well, if it isn't my *old friend* Dale Sexton," Dwayne's voice said on the other end of the line. "How long has it been? Two, three years?"

'Not long enough,' I thought to myself as I sighed.

"I don't usually need your services, Dwayne, so it's best if our paths don't cross too often," I told him. "Besides, you're usually in the line of work that involves hiding people and things from me, and I figure it's best if I don't have to come and lean on you too often. That way if I'm truly stumped, I can come and admit defeat while threatening you enough to still get what I need."

"I can't tell if I ought to be flattered or insulted," Dwayne said to me.

"You can be both. I won't mind."

"Why are you calling me then, Sexton?"

"How'd you like for me to actually *owe* you a favor?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. "Are you serious?"

"I'm as surprised by this offer as you are, Dwayne, but I need your services, and when it comes to what you do, you're one of the best in this part of the world."

There was a slight sniff, and I think Dwayne might've been shedding a single tear of pride on the other end of the line. "That might be one of the damn nicest things anyone's ever said to me, Gunslinger. A'right, what do you need done?"

"I need a stationary concealment spell of the highest caliber. I've stumbled onto a Bhatt Box, and I have no desire to move or disturb it," I tell him. "I'd rather just make a note in my book as to its location, have you cover it back up in the best concealment magics you're capable of, and then just hopefully never have to think about the damn thing ever again."

“Bhatt Box, huh?” he said. “Haven’t had to disappear one of those before, but I know the sorts of magics they use to cover them.”

“They?” I ask, curiously.

“The royal ‘they,’ Gunslinger,” he chuckled. “Relax. I don’t know anything more about them than you do, probably less, truth be told, and I’d rather keep it that way. They spook me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t go spreading this around town, but you’re not the only one,” I admitted. “They unnerve me as well.”

“The mighty Druid Gunslinger shivering in his boots at a little tiny box? Who’d have thought?”

“Yeah, well, the one time one of those things was destroyed, it ate an entire colony, so maybe don’t make fun of me and my cautions, huh?”

“Wait, really? When was this?”

“1588. What’s now North Carolina.”

“... Roanoke?”

“Before there was a Druid Gunslinger, there was a Druid Swordbearer, and the bearer of the time came across one of these damn Bhatt Boxes and attempted to use SoulCleave on it. It worked, but when the magical blast had dissipated, all 100+ colonists had vanished into thin air, and the Swordbearer was left entirely alone. Never did figure out what the hell happened, but you can imagine I’m not eager to repeat that kind of effect in downtown San Francisco, especially down in the financial district.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he replied. “Sure, I can come down there and bury it up for you, make sure it isn’t going to call down anything neither of us wants to stumble onto it. My work studio isn’t more than a couple of blocks away from the financial district, and I have no real desire to be a blip disappeared in the night. Can you hang out by it for twenty minutes or so, just so it’s not exposed to any Tom, Dick and Harry who wanders by?”

“It’s the middle of the night, Dwayne,” I told him. “I highly doubt anyone’s going to come by and poke their head into the financial district.”

“And you’re there... why exactly?”

I sighed. Not because I didn’t have an answer, but because he was right. I hated that. “Yeah, okay, I can wait here.”

“Cool. Text me the street crossing and I’ll see you in a few.”

After he hung up, I texted him the cross streets before I took a picture of the Bhatt Box up close, then several more to document its exact location, and then sent all the pictures to my sister, Charlotte.

*-How the hell did you stumble across that?- she texted me.*

*-Trying to peel away a concealment for a paranoid client. I’ve got Disappearing Dwayne coming over to hide it back up. Unless you want to take it off my hands.-*

*-Fuck no.- she shot back. -But I’ll get it added to the atlas. And hopefully we never speak of it again.-*

It would be quite some time before we spoke of it again, but it certainly wasn't the last time this particular Bhatt Box would ruin my night.

## Chapter Eight – “Enemy dance card”

Despite the fact that there wasn't much of a connection between the Lady of Tides death and my runaway bride, I couldn't help but feel like the two cases were connected. The Atlantean thread was there, but it was flimsy, at best. And as much as I wanted to get back to Detective Gao with some positive news, so far, all I was getting were mixed signals, inscrutable clues and conflicting information that wasn't leading me any closer to where she'd gone.

Any angle of attack I wanted to apply to Gao's case was, unfortunately, going to have to wait. Appointing a new Regent of Tides had to take priority for the next day or two, despite how much I would have rather been working on Gao's case. Dad's echo had said I had thirty days before things would start getting problematic, but there were already reports of conflicts springing up between Elves and Werewolves, both of whom wanted to bring things into the country by sea but couldn't land until they had the approval of a Regent. Since I was the one who had to appoint a new Regent, they were leaving messages with my secretary, asking when they would be able to conduct business again.

If it was just messages, I could probably duck them for a month or two, but people with investments in the matter were starting to hang around my office now, pitching themselves as 'the perfect person' to be the new Regent. Most of them would've been utter disasters, and I could tell that without doing any research. I'd decided that hanging around my office wasn't going to get anything done, so I'd headed down to a coffee shop a few blocks away while I was considering my options. I'd had to use my own back door so that I didn't get followed by people eager to tell me why they were awesome, when I knew that they weren't. I decided to talk to the few people I knew who might be able to offer me some advice on this particular position, and hoped I could spin it as a mutual favor between colleagues.

The first on my list and I hadn't left things on the best of notes last time, though.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and scrolled through the list of contacts before finding her halfway down the alphabet. Mathias, Judith. I'd just gotten up, which meant it was just a little after noon, and well within Judy's normal operating hours, so I tapped her name on the screen and the line sprang to life, ringing her.

"Judy!" I said as I tried to put as much cheer and optimism into my voice as I possibly could. "How are you on this fine day?"

"Sexton," the voice grumbled on the other side end of the line as I could hear her four arms typing away at various keyboards. Judy's a wraith, but I've never held that against her, especially when I have so many *other* things I could hold against her instead. She was holding up in an office deep in the Tenderloin, but as much as I'd expected someone to break into her office at some point, she'd never called me about that. "I cannot possibly think of any good reason that you would be calling me, so I'm going to give you thirty seconds before I hang up on you and pretend you never called me."

"You heard about the Lady of Tides, yeah?"

"No, I'm jammed up with a shitload of shipments that aren't moving anywhere because I'm a dopey bitch who's so out of the loop she can't figure out why nothing's moving in her aquatic businesses," she grumbled at me, her fingers never stopping, capable of doing five or six things at once without too much slowing down. "Of course, I've fucking heard about the Lady of Tides. Everybody's heard about the Lady of Fucking Tides. She's dead, and it's fucking up everybody's day. What's that got to do with me?"

“Despite our differences, Judy, I happen to value your opinion a hell of a lot, so I’m calling you to see if there’s anyone you’d want to nominate for the position,” I told her, as I heard all the typing suddenly come to a complete stop. “Can’t be you, obviously, but…”

“Oh, I wouldn’t touch that fucking job with Morgana’s little toe,” she said with a slightly bitter laugh, pausing in her typing for just a second. “On its’ *best* day, it’s ten kinds of toxic, and I don’t know how many of those kinds of days it’s likely to see any time soon. But getting to put someone else in the job? Someone I think is capable of handling it? That *does* have a certain sense of appeal to it. Let me email you a list of five names. Can you give me an hour?”

“Only just,” I told her. “I’ve got a short list of my own, five of you whose opinions I mostly trust when it comes to sea faring business. I’m giving each of you until 1 pm to get me a list of candidates I should consider, because I can’t have this shit taking up any more of my time. I’ve got Low Tide Timmy hanging around my office, and he’s fucking stinking up the place. Fucking zombie pirates. Always rotting but never falling apart. He stays there much longer, the seagulls are going to set up shop nearby, and once that happens, I’ll never feel safe leaving my motorcycle outside again. So gather up your names and have them to me within the hour, and maybe the next Regent of Tides will owe you a favor for putting their name into the ring. Got it?”

“Thanks, Sexton,” Judy said, sighing a little bit as she started up typing again. Her business stopped for no one. “This isn’t what I expected when I saw your name light up my caller ID. It don’t make us totally square, but let’s just say I can see the edge of black butting up against the red in your ledger.”

“Same for you in mine, Judy,” I told her, terminating the call. Judy was the first of five calls I made to various people I knew in either the import/export businesses or people who worked around the Dark Docks, the premiere loading/unloading space for magical goods coming and going from the west coast. I made the same pitch to all four of the others, each of whom was sufficiently pleased to hear from me, and delighted to be offered a chance to pitch who they thought should be the next overseer of North American nautical work. Mostly they were happy I wasn’t considering any of the people in San Diego or Seattle, but I told them both of those ports were too far away for us to be able to keep tabs on them.

An hour later, I had a lot of options, but only one name had been on over half of the lists – Carlos Aquino, and he practically had water in his lineage. Carlos handled most of the trade between the Southeast Asian factions and the North American factions, and while he was generally known to be a little ruthless when it came to making sure he got his, he also wasn’t known to be exceptionally cruel in preventing others from getting what they’d earned.

That meant I had to do my homework on the guy and see just what kinds of things he was up to, and if any of them presented a problem for me elevating him into a position of significant power. And that took up much of my afternoon. I’d brought my laptop with me and I even had to plug it to keep the battery from running dead. Whereas the details about our vanishing bride-to-be were sparse, the details about Aquino were all over the recommendations about him that my colleagues had sent me, not to mention all the notes in his file that my sister kept, which was in our family database.

He was rough around the edges. He hadn’t come from money and had built everything in his empire with his own two hands. He took offense maybe a little easier than I’d like, but he was very slow to take out that offense on anyone, almost as if he’d long ago learned that he riled up easily and that if he didn’t keep it in check, people would use it to their own advantage instead of his.

After three hours of digging, I was a little surprised that Aquino and I had never personally crossed paths, but I figured he must have been doing everything he could not to get into my crosshairs, and that sort of delicate touch I could appreciate. He had kept all of his business at the Dark Docks from crossing into the sort of forbidden stuff that would've pulled down my ire.

But there was one opinion I hadn't heard from that I wanted to weigh in on the matter, so I pulled my cell phone back out and called my sister, to find out what she *hadn't* included in her notes.

"What's up, little brother?" her voice said to me, even as I could hear her taking the occasional singular rifle shot.

"Are you on hunt?"

"I can multitask," she said to me with the sort of calmness I've learned she'd made second nature when she's staring down the scope of a sniper rifle, picking people off from well outside of their range of discovery. "What's happening?"

"I've been investigating potential new Regents of Tides, and I have a name I want to run by you, see what you think."

"Sure," she said quietly before I heard another singular shot ringing out in the background. "Who are you considering?"

"Carlos Aquino," I told her. "Know him?" Of course I knew that she knew him. She'd put together a whole file on him. That wasn't why I was asking. I was asking to gauge her first reaction, which wasn't what I expected.

There was a moment's pause, which I noted. I didn't know what it meant, but I do know it meant *something* because my sister isn't one to pause when an immediate answer will do. "I do know him," she replied. "I've got a file on him in our database that probably can answer most of your questions. Any reason you're considering him in particular?"

"I put together a list of people I respect in the oceanics business, and of those people, multiple recommended Carlos as a person to consider, independent of each other. So that means he's currently top of my list. But I don't know this guy from Cousin Larry, so I'm asking you, because you've got a lot more experience importing and exporting things for the family than I do."

"Mmm," she agreed noncommittally. "That I have." She paused, maybe considering her options or maybe lining up another shot, because I heard her rifle quietly bark once more before she spoke again. "While Carlos isn't the kind of person I'd want to have dinner with, or invite over to book club, he gets things done and he keeps his enemy dance card mostly a clean slate. He seems like he'd be a fine choice to assume the title, and I wouldn't even have to build a new relationship from the ground up with the guy." She fired yet another round, clearly killing some troublesome pest off on the horizon. "You already read my file on him, didn't you?"

"I did, I've known you long enough, Shar, that I know at least half of what you know about anyone isn't something you write down in their file. I do the same thing. So I called you to see what isn't in the file that I needed to be concerned with."

I swear to you, I'm certain I could hear her smiling on the other end. "Dad would be proud of you Dale."

She actually *meant* it, which took me a bit off guard. “Thanks, sis. I’ll go have a meeting with this guy, size him up for myself, see if he seems okay. If he is, then I’ll offer him the job and then let you know where things stand.”

“Just text me when you’re all said and done,” she replied. “I’m going to be involved in wetwork for the next few hours, so it’s likely I won’t be able to look at my phone for a bit. I’ll shoot you back a reply when I’m not up to my neck in very naughty vampires.”

“Got it. Happy hunting, sis.”

I wasn’t the slightest bit surprised that Charlotte was off hunting down vampires who weren’t following the Accords, because it seemed like lately more and more of the Vampire Nation had gone rogue and decided to start snacking on humans. That meant it was often open season for the Hunters, and as Huntmistress, Charlotte wanted to be seen leading the pack, not following it.

My sister was one of the best hunters alive. Maybe *the* best. That was why when I was truly in a pickle, I always called her first, if I could help it.

And if it didn’t embarrass me too much.

I did a little bit more homework on Carlos Aquino, because I found out that *Dad* had left a file about the guy, although most of his notes were in the man’s early days. I was pleased to see he hadn’t run afoul of the Gunslinger before me, and that he and Charlotte had had a working relationship since she’d taken over the role of Huntmistress, basically confirming all the things my sister had told me, but also letting me make sure my sister hadn’t been overly distracted while she’d been hunting.

The problem is you can only get so much information about a person from reading up on them, and most of the important details you’re going to need you get by sizing up the person when you meet them in person. And I knew going into this, I had rather a big carrot to dangle in front of him.

With the title of Lord of Tides, he was going to be completely in charge of everything coming in and out of the west coast of North America, and it would have a lot of passive income associated with it, and more than a hell of a lot of influence, so I didn’t want to hand it off without doing as much due diligence as I could.

The job of Regent of Tides also made them Harbormaster (or Harbormistress) of the Dark Docks, so imports and exports that went through there all had to pay the tax to the Regent. Much of that money paid staff, security and kept the location safe from discovery, but it also had some off the top that the Regent collected as their own.

And you don’t just give someone a ten million a year position without making sure they can handle a little bit of pressure.

Aquino’s current office was in the Transamerica pyramid, up on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor. His business was called Pacific International Transportation and they had a whole floor to themselves, not that I was entirely surprised. Aquino had been doing well for himself especially in recent years, and as such, they’d decorated their office with a load of expensive looking art. When I stepped from the hallway into the main office itself, I was met by a rather attractive looking secretary behind the counter who had the buttons undone on her top enough to show off a rather monumental amount of cleavage, designed to draw attention to that first and foremost. “Shoes, please?” she said to me, pointing behind me. There against the wall was a shoe rack, and a sign that said, “No shoes permitted beyond entryway.”



I glanced back at her and cocked my neck. “Seriously?”

“Boss’s orders,” she said, trying to offer me a smile that told me she was paid too well to question the mandates from up on high, so I sat down on the bench next to the shoe rack and slid my leather boots off one at a time, tucking them into the shoe tree. I didn’t like removing any layers of my attire, because in doing so, I was setting aside several dozen prepared spells I might need in case of an emergency. “Now, what’s your name, who are you here to see and do you have an appointment?”

“My name’s Dale Sexton and I’m here to see Mister Aquino himself,” I told her. “I’m here regarding Tides business, I don’t have an appointment, but I suspect if you let him know it’s me, he’ll make time to talk to me.”

“Of course, Mister Sexton,” she said to me. “Let me call Mister Aquino and let him know you’re here. Why don’t you take a seat?” I sat down in one of the rather plush, expensive armchairs provided in the lobby. The nicer the lobby, the more they really wanted to buy your patience with their money. Based on how comfortable this lobby was, I almost expected them to forget about me. But I heard the secretary picking up her phone and calling her boss. She was trying to be discreet, but I could hear her voice trying to be quiet. “Mr. Sexton’s here to see you, sir. Yes sir, *that* Mr. Sexton. The younger one. Alright sir, as soon as your meeting ends, I’ll send him down.” She hung up the phone then stood up to look at me over the desk. “Mr. Sexton? Mr. Aquino will see you just as soon as he’s finished his meeting. If you want to head down the hall and wait in the little nook outside of his office, I’m sure his secretary can keep you entertained and refreshed.”

I stood up from the chair and started heading down the hallway before I saw a fork, a sign saying to the left would take me to shipping and to the right would take me to Mr. Aquino’s office, so as much as I would’ve loved to go and peek at the shipping department, I turned right and headed towards the big man’s office, finding a smaller lobby with a secretary outside of it waiting for me. Unlike the main lobby, which had a very generically soothing approach to its décor, the inner sanctum of Mr. Aquino’s office lobby was much more *specific*. The art was all a combination of Native American and Spanish American art, very tailored around oceans. There was also a soundtrack of ocean waves being played over a speaker in the area, as if to really sell the theme home.

Aquino’s personal secretary looked too pretty to be working behind a desk as someone’s secretary, but maybe that was the point. She was the sort of Californian blonde that belonged out on a surfboard, taking in the waves. She was easily taller than me, and stunningly beautiful, with blue eyes that also evoked an ocean. “I’m Stephanie,” she said to me, holding out a bottle of water. “He’s in a meeting, but it shouldn’t be too much longer.”

I took the bottle from her with a soft smile. “Who’s he in there with?”

She shrugged a little bit, her top sliding off one of her shoulders to expose a lovely expanse of flesh down to the top of her breast, exposing a well-tanned curve. “It’s not really my place to say, Mr. Sexton, but it’s not one of his usual clients. They didn’t have a meeting, but Mr. Aquino seemed to know him, so they just walked in together. I believe they met at lunch and were carrying on a meeting from there, because he didn’t have anything on his books until his dinner with his wife this evening.”

“Well, I’ll try not to take up too much of his time once he’s through,” I said, twisting the cap off the bottle of water so I could take a sip from it. It tasted expensively like nothing.

“We would appreciate that, Mr. Sexton,” she said to me almost shyly, although I fully expect that was an act just to make me comfortable with having to wait a bit. She moved to sit behind her desk, and I moved to sit in a much larger, nicer armchair than there was in the main lobby.

Waiting was never fun, but at least it was in a private lounge with a beautiful woman glancing over at me from time to time across her desk. I read the news on my cell phone while I waited, scanning through the local newspapers to see if maybe something had sprung up about a Jane Doe, or if there was any kind of strangeness that I could pick up on and follow up with, but it had been a depressingly quiet two weeks since Saoirse had disappeared. Even most of my usual snitches and gossipmongers were turning up relatively light.

I should’ve known that having a few minutes off my feet was going to come back and bite me in the ass one way or another.

After about ten minutes sitting there waiting, I could start to hear shouting inside of the office, and I was thinking about getting up and investigating when I heard a pair of gunshots ring out from the other side of the door. At that point, I was already on the move, racing towards the door, kicking it in.

On the other side of the door, there was a tall, slender man dressed entirely in black, his skin a deadly pale white, his hair black, long and stringy, trailing down over his shoulders. In his hand, he held a single revolver, the end of the barrel smoking, and on the floor beneath him in the center of the room with two holes in his chest, bleeding out, was Carlos Aquino.

Pure reflexes took over and I found the SoulEnders in my hands before I was even consciously aware of drawing them. I pointed one at the man in black and just barely missed, his head whipping too fast to be a normal person, as the bullet blasted through the glass behind him, shattering out the window. Normally, the sheets of glass are far too thick for a bullet to even punch through, much less shatter, but the SoulEnders are designed to obliterate anything I point them at, so now there was a gaping hole in the side of the building, and I could hear the window whipping around from the foggy afternoon outside.

Of all the things I expected to happen next, seeing the man grabbing Aquino’s ankles and throwing him out the window was down near the bottom, but that’s what happened. The body was airborne before I could even make a move. I charged over towards the man, looking to try and get a clean shot at him, but he tackled me, and out the window the two of us went.

And me without my featherfall boots.

I remember thinking that my one consolation to all of this was that this guy was going down with me, but I felt the cloth of his jacket shrinking in, and the man transformed into a bat and started to fly away from me.

Fucking vampire.

So, now you’re up to speed, much like I was towards the ground. I was plummeting down twenty stories or so to my death and didn’t have my usual anti-falling spells on me. What I did have, however, was my last-ditch full stop spell, but I was going to have to time it right, because it was the middle of the day, and that meant there were plenty of people in San Francisco. The fog was in, however, and it was pretty dense, so I hoped that was going to help cover my little stunt.

My skin is mostly covered in tattoos, but they’re single-use spells, and when the spell is used, the ink disappears. On the front of my left shoulder is what call ‘hammer time,’ a tattoo of an old school sledgehammer breaking through stone. I reach into my shirt, press my fingers against it and say the

activation words, ‘Stop! Hammer time!’ and about eight feet in the air, my body suddenly froze sharply, all the movement simply ending. The spell kills all inertia and kinetic movement of any kind. I’d always figured I’d probably use it if I had to jump out of an airplane without a parachute. I hung there, suspended for about three seconds, and then fell the remaining eight feet down onto the sidewalk, which hurt like hell, but thankfully there wasn’t any glass or shrapnel from the window. Off about twenty feet to my right, I saw Aquino’s body had gotten caught up in the neutral gray concrete latticework that surrounded the base of the building, and thankfully, nobody had seen the corpse because of the trees obstructing the view and the limited visibility because of the weather.

Thank the gods for Karl the Fog.

I called Detective Gao and informed him I was going to need him at a crime scene at the Transamerica Pyramid and that he’d find a body that had fallen from a window several stories higher. He should have forensics come and cordon off the body, I said, and once he did, I’d meet him at the actual crime scene back up on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor, and we’d figure out how the hell we wanted to handle the mess.

Then I walked back into the building and stepped over to the elevator, riding it back up to the 21<sup>st</sup> floor. When I got there, the main lobby was empty, so I simply walked down the hallway to find the lobby woman and Aquino’s personal secretary both standing just outside of his office, peering into it, crying.

I cleared my throat to draw their attention, and the pretty one turned, saw me and fainted, while the older one looked on in total confusion, as if her mind couldn’t make sense of what she was seeing.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “I’m just back to get my shoes.”

## Chapter Nine – “Cali vamps tan”

“You know, when people on the force told me they thought you might be a jinx, I had hoped they were kidding,” Detective Gao said to me. “But no, I should have heeded the advice of my elders and been more wary of the sort of mayhem and carnage you bring in your wake.”

“Hey hey hey, this one ain’t on me, Gao,” I said to him. “Well.” I scowled for a second. “That’s not entirely true, I suppose. It’s *mostly* not on me. The only things that I contributed here are the shattered window and the two living secretaries, instead of this being a triple homicide. Not that anyone’ll say thanks for that. How’re they doing, anyway?”

“Astonished you’re alive, more than anything,” Gao said with a roll of his eyes. “I had to bust in a window a couple of floors down to give you a plausible alibi. Said a wind gust shoved you and the guy you fell out with back into the building and through a window.”

“And they bought it?”

“It’s more likely than ‘He used a magic spell to stop himself from turning into sidewalk pizza,’ don’tcha think?”

I nodded with a grim smile. It was the most useful tool those of us who protected the Veil had – people’s inability to believe in what they *know* for a *fact* they saw. “Yeah, we get that a lot in my line of work. But you didn’t answer my question. How are they?”

“Their boss was just shot and his corpse was thrown out a window,” Gao said to me sarcastically. “They’re doing just peachy. They’re in fucking shock, Sexton. The fuck you think they’re doing? And what do you mean this one ain’t on you? You’re *here*. You were literally outside of the room when the man got shot, and I didn’t see a second body down there on the ground floor. You’re lucky one of the secretaries basically ironclad’s you being out of the room when the shots were fired, or I’d probably be hauling your ass down to the station right now.”

“Wrong place, wrong time, Detective,” I told him with a shrug. “That’s all you got on me here. I was coming to see the man with good news, and to offer him a promotion. Scout’s honor.”

“So, wait, you’re telling me this one’s tied to the other stiff you stumbled across a couple of days ago? She gets killed and this guy’s next in line to the throne or something?”

“Without getting too into the weeds, Detective, that other stiff held an extremely important job, and when she died, it fell on me to find a replacement to assume those job responsibilities.”

“Seems like somebody didn’t like your choice of who to take over the gig, huh?” Gao asked me.

“I’d been thinking along similar lines myself, Detective,” I told him, rubbing the back of my neck. “Although this guy was by no means a slam dunk for the position. Sure, he’d gotten a handful of key recommendations, but I hadn’t met him myself to size him up. That’s what this was supposed to be – me dropping by his office, getting a chance to meet him, take the measure of the man and then offer him the gig, if he wanted it, that was.”

“There a chance he wouldn’t want it?”

“Probably not,” I said calmly. “It brings with it a lot of passive income for not a lot of work. Sure, there’s responsibilities that can be a bit troublesome here and there, but for the most part, it’s easy money and a step up in respect, and that’s the kind of win-win most people love hearing about. It’s a good chunk

of change, but I wouldn't think it's worth killing folk over. There are a *lot* easier ways to make a buck in my community, and most of them don't involve murder."

"You wanna tell me about the guy who went out the window with you?"

"Didn't get all that great a look at him before he transformed into a bat and flew off into the night," I said to him. "Tall build. Long, black, stringy hair. Pale white skin. Fangs. Did I mention the whole 'transformed into a bat' thing?"

"Should I put out a bolo for a V.E. Tempes?" he asked me as dryly as he could.

"Good to see you've got your sense of humor about this," I said with a smirk. "This is going to be one of those cases where you're just going to attribute it to a random John Doe you get in the morgue in the next day or two, somebody who fell out a window and then died as the result of his fall. Worry about me trying to do the whole law and order thing here."

"Maybe I skip all that and just stamp it with the little crossed revolver stamp my boss gave me on the first day of work that I swore I'd never use," Gao grumbled. "She told me that there would come a day when I'd get a case where I'd know what truly happened, but that I couldn't possibly put it in my report for fear of being committed to the nuthouse. Every so often, I'd come across a cold case file with that little insignia stamped on it, crossed old school revolvers, and I'd wonder what the hell had really happened. Guess I'm finally having to deal with those kinds of cases myself."

"You had to know the day would come," I told him. "But hey, you're closing cases. You can close this one and the DiMaggio case. Chalk it up to the same John Doe. I'd originally figured that was just a crime of opportunity, somebody breaking into her office, not really knowing who she was, but that murder and this one? Definitely connected."

"Could be coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidence, and I don't think you do either, Detective," I said to him. "No no, either there's a hidden connection between these two or the obvious connection has details I'm missing and need to find out."

"Not to be *that* asshole, but how's *my* case coming?"

I sighed, sitting back down in the little lobby chair I'd been waiting in when I'd heard the shots fired about an hour ago, looking up at him. "So, she *didn't* run off on you. That much I'm pretty sure of. And while I don't have any direct proof that she's tied up in all of this, I've got this gut feeling that I can't quite shake that there's some kind of link between all of this mess that I'm missing. Some piece of the puzzle I haven't found yet that'll connect all the various pieces. Your girl's Queen thinks pretty highly of you, though, and the marriage had been sanctified by their internal government body, so whatever's happened to her, they probably aren't involved, I think. Her body hasn't turned up yet, and her Queen hasn't declared her dead, and the Queen'd know if she kicked it, so that's proof positive that she's still alive, wherever she is." I shrugged a little. "Not the update you wanted to hear, I know, but I did promise I'd give you the truth, as uncomfortable as it might be."

Gao nodded, rubbing his chin. He hadn't shaved since I'd seen him last, and he was starting to get scruffy in all the worst ways. The bags under his eyes were deeper set, and the despair had begun to creep in around the edges. "How sure are you that she's still alive?" His voice was pleading for good news, something he could cling onto as a beacon of hope.

“98%,” I told him, putting forth as much confidence as I could. “The death of a leannán sídhe can’t pass the Queen’s notice, and if she had died, the Queen would’ve contacted me to let me know. So, unless she was taken off this continent before she was killed, she’s still alive. Take comfort in that. Besides, if she’s not dead now, then whoever’s taken her has a need for keeping her alive, and that doesn’t seem like it’ll end any time soon. I’ll keep working the case, and sooner or later, I’ll figure out who’s taken her, why and how to get her back. I can’t guarantee you’ll be happy with the end result, because without knowing why they took her, I can’t predict if her usefulness is going to evaporate or not before I get there. But it hasn’t so far, and you should take that as a good sign.”

“Alright, Gunslinger,” Gao said to me. “We’ll do it your way for now. But I want it known that I’m way more concerned about her safety than I am helping you cover shit like this up, at least until you’ve honored your end of the deal. I’m paying for results, not speculation.”

I smirked, giving him a little nod. “There you go. Now you’re getting into the spirit of the sort of bullshit palace intrigue you’re going to be dealing with for the rest of your life. Once you catch your first case like this, it’s like a cancer you can’t ever fully cut out. You’ll go weeks, maybe even months without an odd case catching your attention, but then they’ll start creeping back in again. This is your life now. Sorry you had to stumble down here into the muck and the quagmire, but it’s good to have another ally on the force.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that, Sexton? Get outta here, before I find a reason to forget that I’m paying you to be an asshole.”

I left Gao behind, knowing he’d be miserable cleaning up the mess I’d inadvertently made for him, but that he’d also definitely taken some comfort in the fact that his girl was still alive. That part I hadn’t been lying about, thankfully. As complicated as his mess was, I didn’t want to let him down, and I still had the title of Regent of Tides to bestow on somebody. I was supposed to be getting *rid* of problems, not *adding* to them.

For the time being, though, I needed to sit and gather my thoughts, so I headed over towards one of my favorite restaurants, The Stinking Rose. It’s a Bay Area institution, and specializes in garlic recipes, thus the name. As I ordered myself an early dinner, I pulled out the lists of names that my colleagues had sent me, because I suspected that the person responsible for the two murders was someone on this list, and the rest of the names on the list could be next in line to get bumped off.

None of the people on the list struck me as vindictive power-hungry backstabbing assholes, but then again, I didn’t really *know* a lot of the people on the list that well. The Dark Docks had done an incredible job of being vital to the region and yet somehow had evaded anyone giving it serious thought for decades. It had just been doing business as usual, and without much in the way of scrutiny.

Perhaps I was going to have to be the scrutinous eye.

The next thing I did while the staff continued to bring me course after delicious course of garlicky pasta was take out my sketch pad and pencil. One of the things that my father had always been impressed with about me was my ability to remember what I’d seen and sketch it out later. So I began drawing the vampire I had seen standing over Aquino’s body, committing each detail slowly to paper.

It was a time-consuming process, but it let me focus on all the details and try and discern what I could about the vampire in question. He was utterly pale, which meant it was unlikely he was local. I know, there’s a myth about all vampires being alabaster white, but if you ever take the time to get to know a vampire, you’ll find a lot of mythology is wrong. Vampires don’t have any problem going out during the

daytime. Oh, it's not their *preferred* time, but that's because it's harder to conceal munching on someone's carotid artery during the daytime than it is at night. But out here?

Cali vamps tan.

There was also something about the guy's coat – nothing local, Russian or at least eastern European. Something heavy and designed for serving one's country out in the middle of the fucking snow and ice. It was cold just to look at the fucking thing. I committed its massive cloth folds to paper, and then I remembered how I'd only take a quick glance at the man's boots, but they were massive, hulking things, the perfect accompaniment to the jacket, leather that had seen mud caked on them so often that the owner had given up on the idea of polish and had resorted to just washing them off now and again instead.

Finally, the last detail that had jumped out at me was the gun. It was a snub-nosed .38 Special. I hadn't seen one in a while. Sure, back in the '60s and '70s they were everywhere, but they'd become less common over recent years, people preferring automatic weapons rather than a cylinder with only six bullets in it. The service revolver had been out of fashion for some time, and the gun the guy was holding had certainly seen better days. It hadn't been bought locally – that was that guy's personal gun, and he must've always kept it with him.

This meant out of town, but thankfully, I had my contacts inside of the vampire scene. It was getting to be early evening, which meant they'd all be up and at them, and it was a Friday, which meant the city would be bustling with life tonight and not a complete ghost town like it typically was on weeknights. That meant it would be easier to grill my contacts.

There were a lot of vampires in town I could go and talk to, but the softest target would be to go and see Ali. Ali Chen ran one of the feeding brothels in town that existed somewhere between the grey and the midnight, but kept their noses clean enough to fall within the accords. Plus, Ali had gone out of her way several times to stay on my good side, so I'd made sure that as long as they adhered to the strict bylaws of feeder brothels, they didn't get bothered.

Ali's Artery didn't advertise anywhere, didn't have any signage marking it off, and, in fact, could've been just another anonymous building in San Francisco's Chinatown district, but the building housed a dozen 'feeder' rooms, and employed close to a hundred 'professional meals.' That'll make more sense a little later.

When I got to the door, Felix was trying to be as indiscreet as a bouncer can be standing outside of a gate, but he smiled a little when he saw me. He was six foot tall and built purely out of muscle and leather, like a vampire Hell's Angel. "Hey Dale, what's happening?" he said to me, holding out a fist, which I bumped with my own.

"Ali around tonight?"

"Yeah, we've got problem with a meal gone off," Felix said to me. "Ali could probably use a hand with it, if you're looking for something to trade her."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crisp hundred-dollar bill, tucking it into Felix's hand. "That's why I like you, Felix. You're always watching out for people."

"I know who my friends are, Dale," Felix said, squirreling the bill away before moving to open the gate. As he did, he reached under his jacket and pulled out a walkie-talkie, bringing it up to his lips as he clicked it on. "One coming in. Not a client. It's the Gunslinger, here to see the boss." He clicked off the walkie and holstered it back on his hip. "You should be good to go."

I stepped through the open gate and down a very steep set of stairs leading into the bowels of the building, walking down a very long dark hallway with a single lightbulb doing a piss poor job of illuminating the space. There were cameras up above me, watching my every move, making sure I was who I said I was. When I reached the end the hallway, a single door awaited me, with a small panel and a solitary button next to it. I pushed the up button and the tiny elevator opened. The elevator into the place couldn't fit more than four people in it, but thankfully I had the ride to myself. There were only two buttons to push, Out, the floor I was on, and In, the floor at the top. I pushed In and the elevator closed and began to rise in that terrifying way that only a hundred-year-old elevator can.

Once at the top of the three-story building, the elevator opened and let me out into the small parlor area where the punters came in and screened their meals before they sat down to eat. See, vampires need to feed on human blood, and while some vamps don't mind drinking blood from a blood bank, most prefer warm, fresh blood, drained straight from the source. Now, it's not all that difficult to do that without killing the source, as long as the vamp is being careful, considerate and doesn't get a big head about it, and the person being fed upon enjoys the experience.

Ali's Artery is a brothel where instead of sex, clients are coming in for blood. 'Meals,' as the people were called, knew what they were getting into, and could be fed upon once a week or so, being rotated out after that to let them heal up. Some people danced naked for money. Some people traded sex for cash. These people just had more literal skin in the game.

Usually when a client came in here, the madam on duty would bring out a laptop with all the various options on offer. Feeding on a person isn't just a simple transaction to a vampire – oh no, I've heard it described as if making a wine selection. You had to know what you were getting into when you fed on someone, and to cultivate their emotions to get exactly what you wanted out of the meal.

And instead of the madam on duty, Ali herself was waiting for me in the parlor, looking very much the woman in charge. She was only a hair's breadth above 5', dressed in a slinky red and black silk cheong dress with an intricate dragon pattern running from her neckline all the way down to her ankles, a long slit up the side exposing more than plenty of her elegant thighs. Her black hair was done up in a bun, held into place with chopsticks. She looked just about old enough to be a student at one of the local colleges, even though she was in actuality close to a hundred years old. "Well well well, look who's come walking into my joint," Ali said with a dry laugh. "I'm starting to think you really are psychic, and whenever someone's thinking, 'Gee, I really could use the Gunslinger's services right now,' you just mysteriously appear out of the fog."

"I should be so lucky," I told her with a smile, moving over to give her a hug. I was going to kiss her on the cheek, but she turned her head and pressed her lips against mine for a moment before pulling back, a wry smirk on her lips.

"I always wanted to do that," she said, licking her lips. "So tell me why you're *actually* here and then I can offer up what the cost of that is with the thing I need done."

"How do you know I'll do the thing you need done?" I asked her.

"Because you're practically a Boy Scout, Gunslinger," she said, moving over to the bar in the little parlor area, sitting on a stool, patting the one next to it for me to join her. "And you love helping people. That's what my ask is. Helping someone. How about yours?"

I reached into my satchel and pulled out the sketch I'd made earlier. "New vamp in town, fucking my shit up, causing all sorts of problems," I said, sliding her the piece of paper. "I need to find him and



deal with him. He's killed at least one person, more than likely a couple more beyond that. Not to mention throwing me out of a window, which, y'know, I take personally."

"Turned into a bat and flew off on you, did he?"

"Tale as old as time," I grumbled. "You know him?"

"I don't personally know him, no, but I'm sure I can find out who he is while you're solving my issue here," Ali said, taking the sheet of paper from me. "What I need from you is to figure out why one of my meals doesn't taste the way it's supposed to."

"You're sure they're here voluntarily? A couple of times your recruiters have used the thrall a bit too hard on them. You know that always leads to bitter meals, which is why you aren't supposed to do it," I said to her. "I know, I know, it's a dumb question, but when you're troubleshooting, it doesn't hurt by going over the obvious things."

"She's here voluntarily, although when she's being fed on, she's under the thrall, with her permission, of course. That shouldn't be spoiling the taste," she said to me. "Her name is Keegan, she's here from Kansas, and she was recruited for us by Arturo."

I rolled my eyes a little bit, shaking my head. "There's your first problem right there," I said. "I've warned you about Arturo before. He's a hammer in a job where you want a scalpel. I'll give you ten-to-one odds he screwed something up in the onboarding."

"You just don't like him because he dated one of your exes."

I smirked, rolling my eyes. "Everyone's dated one of my exes," I shot off casually. "I bet you've been banging someone I dated at some point in your busy social life. So, no, I don't hold that against him. What I *do* hold against him is that he's sloppy with his work. Let me see her file."

Ali passed over a folder to me, which I opened to find a headshot of a cheery, pretty Midwestern blonde in a bikini, sitting on Ocean Beach, looking out over the Pacific, a surfing board by her side, her hair tugged back into a ponytail. I was surprised she wasn't wearing a wetsuit, but decided the board was more of a prop for the shot. I turned past the headshot and read into her profile. Age: 23. Blood type: O+. Point of Origin: Council Grove, Kansas. Start of service: Two weeks ago. Likes: Masochism, subjugation, degradation, supernatural elements. Dislikes: Wimps, passive partners, romance. Recruited by: Arturo.

"What do you think?" Ali asked me.

"What's the problem, specifically?"

"She has a bitter taste to her, meaning the experience isn't to her liking, although she's not telling us, which means it's something we're doing wrong and she can't explain to us," Ali said. "You want to go have a run through with her, see if you can spot what we're missing? She's fine with servicing a man or woman's normal needs, in addition to working us with more sanguine pursuits."

"The price of you identifying my mark, huh?"

Ali smirked, rolling her eyes back at me. "Like you mind fucking a pretty girl."

"Yeah, alright," I said. "Let me go talk to her at least and sort out what your problem is while you're trying to locate who my killer is, considering he's one of your kind."

"You're sure of that?"

“Saw him bat out right in front of me.”

“Can’t imagine someone dumb enough to not turn tail and run as soon as you drew a SoulEnder on them, but I bet if I dig deep enough, I’ll find them.”

“Yeah, okay then.” I sighed. “Let me go give her a rundown, and I’ll have your answer in half an hour or so.”

“Don’t rush on my account,” she said. “I might have to call in some markers. If you want to have a bit of fun with her, do so. She’ll only thank you for it, if you’re getting it right. She’s a bit shaken up, though, right now. Afraid we’re going to shitcan her, because she’s spoilt. I’m hoping you can correct that for our sake and for hers.”

“Where is she?”

“Room 3B, just down the hall on the right.”

“Back soon enough,” I said as I got up off the stool and started walking down the hallway. The Artery doubled as a brothel when the vampire population was light, and so the SFPD looked the other way, and business kept rolling, whether vamps were around or not, and one of the Gunslinger’s responsibilities was to make sure nobody was being trafficked. Once a year or so, I would come in, choose a woman or man at random, and then just screen them to make sure they were here of their own volition, and not compelled to be here. Ali was adamant about that kind of thing, which was one of the reasons I liked her.

I headed down the hall and was about to knock on the door when I found it partially open, so I stepped inside. There was Keegan, sitting in a red silk nightie, sniffing, holding tissues to her face. There were two small red dots on her neck that had immediately scabbed over as soon as the vamp had taken his fangs out, but still had a couple of blood trails running down to her collarbone. “Oh God, you’re here to fire me, aren’t you?” she said to me, fear in her eyes.

“Relax, honey,” I said to her with a soft smile. “I’m here to help get you back on track.”

“Really? Thank God! I need this fucking job, and I like the whole vampire thing, and the money’s really gr—”

“Silence,” I said to her and watched her fall deadly silent. “You were recruited by Arturo?”

“Yes sir,” she said to me, and I could see a shiver run down her spine.

“You like being fed upon?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do they fuck you when they feed?”

“I’ve been fed upon twice, sir. One time I was fucked beforehand. The other was going to fuck me afterward, but both people stopped feeding prematurely,” she said with a frown. “They said something was wrong and I tasted... off.”

“Mmm. That’s why I’m here,” I said, reaching into my satchel, pulling out a small copper bracelet. “Here, put this on.”

“But I—”

“No arguing.”

“Yes sir.”

She affixed the bracelet to her right wrist, and I felt a small shudder down my spine as I was connected to her nervous system. The problem with this kind of thing was that people sometimes false self-reported about what they liked, because they were trying to satisfy their handlers. The problem was that if things crossed into uncomfotability, then the taste of the blood soured, and the vamps didn't like how it tasted. The old saying is you only feed on the willing, but that was harder these days, because vamps weren't allowed to thrall people who weren't violent criminals, and so they needed not only willing, but eager participants.

“Kneel, slut,” I told her, and felt a positive tingle running up my back. So we were on the right track, and she did like being ordered around, and probably liked being talked down to.

“Yes sir,” she said, as she slipped off the bed and down onto her knees as I closed the door to her room, just so that we weren't interrupted. I didn't expect any punters to walk by, but I had to be sure of these sorts of things.

“Strip,” I said to her and she pulled off the nightie. One of her nipples was bruised purple, and I glanced at it, as it seemed like she wasn't sure what to do with it. “You seem to have been injured.”

“It's nothing, sir.”

I reached down and touched the bruised nipple and she winced, and I felt a negative tingle flushing through me. Then I moved my hand away and pinched her unbruised nipple, not so hard as to bruise, but enough for her definitely feel the protest of her nerves, and yet, the tingle turned back towards positive again.

‘Idiot,’ I thought to myself. ‘He's not adjusted for scaling. Fucking unforced rookie error.’

When I said Arturo was a hammer in a job that required a scalpel, I hadn't been being snarky for effect. Arturo was just smart enough to find out what turned someone on but wasn't smart enough to see if there was a cap on it. The girl was a pain slut, but in moderation and with a lower max than her partners had expected. Both the people who'd been feeding on her before had probably gone too far, and when that threshold was crossed, her blood started to curdle to their tastes. And, knowing Arturo, he probably hadn't gone down the line far enough during her recruiting to *find* that cap, so it was up to me to learn where the lines were, since it was clear Keegan wasn't going to say what they were.

“What is your safeword, bitch?” I asked her.

“This girl does not have one, sir,” she said, not looking up at me, her eyes trained on her hands.

I reached down and grabbed her chin and pulled her head to tilt it up to look at me. “Do you want to stay here and be fed on, slut, or do you want me to have them throw you back like an unpleasant fish?”

There were tears in her eyes. “This girl wishes to stay, sir.”

“Then you are going to pick a safeword right now, and you are going to get it ingrained inside of your empty-headed skull that when the pain has crossed from something you enjoy to something that no longer sparks pleasure, you will need to use that safeword, even if it is just to get your partner to back down some,” I told her, making her stare up at me. The angle gave me a definite feeling of power, which I was using to make the point crystal clear to her. “When your body is feeling more pain than it is pleasure,

you ignorant slut, it spoils the taste of your blood to vampires, which is why the two times someone's fed on you, they've been unable to complete their feeding. They were both too rough, weren't they?"

"They... they bruised this girl, sir," she said, tears in her eyes. "But she did not wish to offend."

I moved my hand from her chin up to wipe the tears away comfortably. "The only way this works is if you are genuinely enjoying yourself, girl," I said to her. "No play acting. No faking it. Either you are feeling pleasure, or your blood will taste off to those who would feed upon you." There was a kindness in her eyes, and I could feel the positive energy flowing back into me. "Do you like being spoken down to, degraded, or was that something you said to try and appeal to your recruiter?"

"This girl likes degradation with love, sir, a worthless slut who is being treated kinder than she deserves," Keegan said to me, her face seemingly incapable of lying to me at that point.

I decided to test it and spit in her face. I felt a positive tingle pulse through me once more. So that much was true. "Do you enjoy your sex rough or soft? Don't lie to me, bitch; I can read you like a fucking book, and if you lie to me, you will regret it."

"Rough, sir, but with a soft landing," she said, nervously biting her bottom lip. "Aftercare is important, but both times, we never got that far, because they couldn't feed on me."

I wiped my spit from her face and nodded. "Your safeword will be Druid," I told her. "When someone is pushing you too far, you will give that once as a caution flag, twice as a warning, and a third time at the top of your lungs, and one of Ali's people will come running. You chose this life, this position, and I can genuinely feel you want to be part of their community, not just for the money but because the idea of giving your lifeblood to someone else thrills you. To help keep them alive turns you on more than you can possibly describe. But the rules are there for reasons, not just your own protection, but to ensure the transaction is satisfactory to all parties. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," she said to me.

I considered her for a long moment, but eventually let out a soft sigh. "You can remove the bracelet, stand up and get dressed."

"Sir?"

"I've got everything I need to make sure your place here is corrected, and that you and your clients will have nothing but ideal encounters moving forward."

"Don't... wouldn't you like to fuck me, sir?"

"I wouldn't mind taking the edge off, but you, Keegan, have had two tumultuous encounters in a row, and your blood sugar level is a little low," I said to her, patting her shoulder. "I'm going to go have a talk with Ali, and we'll make sure your file is updated so that your clients will do their best to give you as enjoyable an experience as you are trying to give them."

"This girl feels bad she hasn't given from herself to you, sir, for all that you've done for her," she said, reaching up to stroke my waist.

I helped her back up to her feet, a slight chuckle on my lips. "If I promised to return another time to clear that ledger once you're healed up, would that be good enough?"

“Thank you, sir,” she said to me, as she removed the bracelet from her wrist and the link was severed. “This girl would like that very much.”

I patted her on the shoulder once more and then turned away, opening the door to walk out of the room and back down the hallway as I tucked the bracelet back into my satchel. When I got to the waiting room, Ali wasn't there, but Arturo was – all nearly 7' feet of him. “You find out what's wrong with the product, Gunslinger?” he asked me.

There were only a few steps between him and I, so he never saw the punch coming that I delivered straight to his kidney. I watched him fall into a pile on the ground as I spat on him. “You need to learn some fucking moderation, you goon,” I growled at him. “That girl in there almost got herself killed because you can't tell the difference between someone who likes her ass paddled red and someone who likes to be hit hard enough to leave bruises. If this is going to be your fucking job, you better learn how to do it fucking correctly, because the next time this shit happens, I'll be down here and challenging you to a duel, so you don't screw up your boss's business any further.”

He coughed a bit and looked up at me, anger in his eyes. “It's just fucking product,” he said, right before I kicked him in the gut with my steel-toed boot, which made him slump down onto the floor.

“You done beating up my staff?” Ali's voice had come from the door and my head whipped up to look at her.

“Depends,” I said, trying to cool my jets just a little. “Your idiot recruiter somehow confused a mild masochist for a full-blown triple A pain slut. That's why she kept spoiling. The two feeders got too rough, and she was in pain instead of pleasure when they sunk fangs in. It ain't fucking rocket science. Arturo should've sized her up on recruiting, found that it wasn't that hard to push her into uncomfortable territory. She likes a *bit* of pain, not the full fucking main course. Update her file. I've given her a safeword. Your punters follow the rules and color within the lines, everyone'll be happy, and she'll probably be a good employee for several years.” I glanced down at the hulk-shaped pile beneath me. “This one, on the other hand... I find out he fucks up like this again or he refers to your employees as ‘product’ one more time, I'll show him the main product of the Druid Gunslinger. We clear?”

“Like a diamond,” she said, holding up a file folder for me. “And I held up my end. Everything I could gather on your flatliner fang, although it wasn't that much.” I walked across the room and grabbed the file from her hand angrily, as she put her other hand on my hip. “Swear to you, Dale. I'll handle this,” she said as quietly as possible.

“See that you do,” I grumbled. “That girl was terrified it was *her* fault, when your moron of a recruiter couldn't be bothered to take measurements for himself.”

Ali sighed and nodded, then gave me a hug. “Go get your asshole, cowboy. It seems like he's a black hat of the worst sort.”

I took the file with me and headed back towards the elevator, having made good progress, but in a fouler mood than when I'd arrived.

## **Chapter Ten – “Not the Dial-A-Bullet Hotline”**

The vampire in question was named Viktor Kolmach, and he was from eastern Europe. In accordance with the Hunter Accords, he'd checked in with the Hunt Captain of the Vampires, but hadn't been incredibly specific about where he'd be staying while he was in town, claiming he would be 'with friends' and had listed a couple of names as contacts.

This was where I *started* to get very annoyed, because the Hunt Captain hadn't been paying much attention to the 'friends' that Viktor said he'd be staying with, otherwise he would've noticed that one of them, Cassandra Liebitz, had been dead for a few years now, so Viktor was rather unlikely to be staying with her. The other, Max Stelford, was the guy who knew literally every vampire ever made, and putting him down as a reference was a running joke that someone didn't want to be found. Sure, Max might have seen you, but Max sees everybody, and Max remembers nothing. Viktor had probably checked in with Max, but Max also ran one of the busiest import/export businesses on the West Coast, so if Max didn't have to care, Max didn't care. Max wasn't bad people, just in high demand.

Over the years, I've had to work very hard to combat my prejudice towards vampires. I grew up knowing they were just people like everyone else, but I also remember seeing my first feeding when I was only seven years old. Dad had brought me and Charlotte along to a meeting, because he was always keen on making sure we were learning our tradecraft as early as possible, and on this particular day, Dad wanted to stress to us the importance of being able to look at every person without deciding things *about* them *for* them.

'Let people reveal themselves to you,' Dad said, 'and never dictate to them who you *want* them to be before they do.'

Charlotte and I had both worked as hard as possible to remember that lesson, but it had been extremely hard oftentimes.

On that day when I was seven, I watched a powerful vampire named Selene Baghera suckle on the neck of a young man who looked lucky if he was eighteen, although my father assured me that he was. Selene had come to barter to raise the hunting levels for vampires in the Colorado Rockies, and the negotiations had been taking quite a long while for reasons that I was, unfortunately, still a little too young to understand at the time.

In retrospect, I've since learned that there was a mass migration of vampires from both eastern Europe and the Middle East to the United States, in an effort to avoid being caught up in warzones that had broken out, and in order to not overextend any one particular zone, they'd scattered a great deal over the country, but it turned out many of them had found the Rocky Mountains to be excellent habitats. They didn't mind the cold, they sort of enjoyed winter sports and it was astonishing how many people died to exposure, leaving them to be feasted upon.

That said, they were in need of opening a handful of feeding lodges, places they could set up where men and women volunteered to be fed upon, usually in exchange for money, but sometimes just for the thrill of being fed on.

What can I say? Anne Rice books were big at the time, and vampire romance was flourishing in bookstores and libraries across the country. A few decades later, it would be those damn Twilight books. I'm convinced there's some vampire patron who's smart and owns a book company and makes sure there's always some kind of bodice ripper featuring vampires and of decent enough quality out there, converting a new generation into willing feed bags.

Selene needed to feed, and she had gotten a young man from a local feeding lodge sent over, and I will never forget the look of sadness in his eyes while he waited, only to see it disperse and be replaced by a look of great ecstasy as he drifted off while she drank deep of his blood.

That young man still works in one of the local feeder halls, although he's no longer young and spry. He still enjoys what he does, however, even if he does spend a few days each month on his back recovering from having his blood drained. I've talked to him a handful of times, and he's always told me that there isn't any greater moment in his life than those when he's being fed upon.

I can't tell you how much that scares the crap out of me.

One of the things I also learned early on in life was how to spot addiction, and those who like to be fed on generally had that in spades. People find something that gives them bliss, and for whatever reason, they'll sacrifice every other moment of happiness they have chasing a few more seconds of bliss. Me, myself, I'd rather make *every* moment as good as possible instead of trying to catch a falling star.

To me, vampires were, by their very nature, exploiting that human weakness, that addict's need to go chasing after an unquenchable high that they could never hold onto. I understand that it's part of their very nature, that they have to feed on blood to survive, but it's never sat right with me, the parasitic nature of their relationship with all the other species in the food chain.

So, I have to remind myself going into any situation where it comes to dealing with vampires that they aren't all bad people, because I just know my perception of them skews towards the negative. That's on me. I'm working on it, but, y'know, at the end of the day, vampires still drink blood. So there's only so much give room I got in me.

I could call Max and see if he remembered talking to Viktor, but I had a sneaking suspicion that was going to be a fool's errand. Max talked to more vampires on a day-to-day basis than I would in a month, maybe two.

I'd been to Ali Chen's feeder brothel, and while she hadn't known the fella in question, she'd been able to pick up his trail, at least a little bit. He'd been in a different feeder brothel, Countess Montrovo's, over near Russian Hill, and while he'd paid and fed like any other customer, the Countess warned the other feeder proprietors that he was someone to be kept an eye on, as she suspected he'd been 'wild fanging,' which was slang for feeding on the homeless population. It was a dangerous way to spread diseases to brothel workers, and the last thing any of them wanted to do was to have their whole world come collapsing down because some screener hadn't done their job. The Countess had warned all the other feeders in town that he should be treated as a new client, and they should run a bio screen on him before letting him feed.

Stopping by to see the Countess felt like the next natural stop, so I headed across town to visit my second feeder brothel in just a few hours. It wasn't my first time jumping between brothels in an evening, but this was for far less enjoyable reasons.

Montrovo's was, much like Ali Chen's, an entire building that screamed 'go away.' It was a three-story house that had a high fence around it and a little buzzer at the gate in front. The trees blocked most of the view of the place, although you could, at certain angles, see panes of one-way glass reflecting back the foliage around it. The views from those rooms were amazing, and added to the ambiance of the place like you wouldn't believe. I stepped up to the gate and pressed the button on the buzzer, looking up directly at the camera I knew was looking down on me from its nestled and concealed hideaway.

“Not time for an inspection,” a familiar voice, deep, gruff, and heavily accented, says on the other end of the line.

“Relax, Brass, I’m not here to bust anybody’s balls tonight,” I tell him with a laugh. “Here to get a bit of info on a red flag you tossed up yesterday to the other feeders.”

“What about it?”

“Can I come in, or you want to have this whole conversation with me standing out here on the street? Where anyone can walk by and hear about what kind of buis—” I wasn’t even through the word when the gate buzzed and unlatched. “Thought not,” I chuckled beneath my breath, heading though the opening, closing and latching it behind me.

At some point, Montrovo’s had actually been someone’s home, some wealthy rail or oil baron, likely, but they’d left it to Countess Montrovo when they’d died, and she’d been running it as a feeder brothel ever since and that had been over a hundred and fifty years ago. There was a small yard out front, with a lime tree off to one side, and a bench off to the other. Sitting on a series of wooden steps leading up from the walkway to the porch was Countess’s right-hand man, Nils ‘Brass’ Novoka.

Brass was probably the most Russian soul I’d ever met. He was only 5’6” or so, with long black stringy hair that hung to his collarbone, his skin an off-white like soiled snow, his eyes always with large bags beneath them, his beard too long to be considered stubble but too inconsistent to be considered a real beard, his eyes cold and blue and ancient looking. He wore the rattiest blue jeans I’d ever seen, more tatters than actual pants at this point, a black leather jacket that probably was sewn together in the 1950s, and a white t-shirt with Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Born To Run’ cover on it that had faded but was still legible, as if he’d taken care of that shirt more than anything else in his life. Down in the bottom right corner of it, though, there were still a few pink spots, blood stains that nothing had quite been able to get rid of. He was smoking one of those unfiltered Russian tar sticks they called cigarettes, and the scent of it wafted around him like a cloak of stench and midnight. He had a silver flask sitting next to him that I’d have bet just about anything on contained some of the purest, most distilled and chilled vodka this side of the Pacific.

He simultaneously looked nineteen and a thousand.

“So, if you are not here for inspection,” he said, that voice still dripping with the accent of his homeland, “then why are you here, Gunslinger? Is this the day you and I finally draw down?” His hand hovered over his hip tentatively for a long moment before he and I both started laughing and he pointed a finger gun at me. “Pew pew!”

“Damn traitorous Russian!” I shouted in mock agony, clutching at my chest. “We were supposed to pace off!” For effect, I fell to my knees and pantomimed blood spurting from my chest like I was in Sam Peckinpah film. A few seconds later I laughed, stood back up and reached out to shake Brass’s hand. “Heya comrade, how’s it going?”

“De fuck are you doin’ here, Gunslinger? This about that sketch fanger we sent the alert out about last week?” Brass shook his head and grumbled something in Russian I couldn’t pick up. “I told the boss lady he was going to be trouble, but she said business is business, and as long as he’s not breaking rules and screens clean, we let’em in. What did he do?”



“One confirmed kill, two possible others,” I said as we started to walk up the stairs. “More annoyingly, he threw my ass out a window. Or, I suppose, if I’m being more accurate, he dragged my ass out a window and then flew off while I was trying to figure out how to not die.”

Brass winced overdramatically, laughing a little bit. “Bet you must be *pissed*.”

“You have *no* idea.”

“No one is allowed to get the better of Dale Sexton,” the Countess’ voice purred as we entered the front living room, a handful of men and women loitering about, watching television or reading books. Like most feeder brothels, the ‘feeder’ aspect was kept to the background, and the place spent most of its time being an actual brothel, not that *that* was legal in San Francisco, either, but sex work had a long and storied history in the Bay Area, and people had been getting by for a long, long time, usually with the cops looking the other way as long as it kept disease and crime in check. And beyond that, we had an arrangement with the SFPD to ignore the feeder houses, as per the Hunter Accords. They’d initially not been thrilled at turning a blind eye to vampires living and working within the city limits, but when it had been explained to them that either we would have feeder houses or the vampires would be allowed free hunting throughout the city below an enforceable cap based on population, the SFPD wisely chose to keep a lower body count. “How’ve you been, Dale?”

Unlike her right hand man, the Countess Bella Montrovo had worked extremely hard to blend in, and instead of looking like she walked out of a Tolstoy novel, she looked much more the part of a local hippie dippy crystal queen, somewhere between the Free Love and New Age generations, with a big, billowy sundress that clung to her like a promise, her raven black hair smooth and silky, her figure full without being too Rubenesque. She was curvy in all the ways that would draw the attention of any red-blooded man or woman and hold onto it for as long as she wanted it. Any hint of accent she might have ever had was gone, and she spoke at least a dozen languages conversantly. In addition to running both the feeder and the brothel parts of the house, she also gave tarot readings and other forms of divination.

My late father, who certainly had his thoughts about ‘predicting the future,’ had never gone out of his way to rule the possibility out completely and told me that if I ever wanted a glimpse into the potentials that awaited me, the Countess was as close to the real deal as he’d ever come. He’d never tell me what she’d told him, but I knew my father well enough to know when he’d seen something he couldn’t explain, and the one time I’d seen him come back from a reading by the Countess, he’d looked *shook* like I’d never seen, not before or since.

I’d never quite been daring enough to get a reading from the Countess.

“It’s been a hell of a week so far, Countess,” I sighed. “I picked up a case that looked like it should’ve been a simple find and rescue but has been nothing but a pain in my ass. I got a fanger racking up a bodycount and trying to throw me out of skyscrapers. I got a dead Lady of Tides and the person I was going to *replace* her with was the one our troublesome vamp killed. Which means I *still* got a missing person, I *still* got no replacement Regent of Tides and I’m *still* trying to figure out what this jackass’s plan is, if he’s even got one, and he’s not just randomly dropping bodies left and right to fuck up my case.”

“Who’s missing?”

“Runaway fae bride.”

“You sure she didn’t change her mind?”

“Everyone keeps asking that, but if it’s that way, she went *way* out of her way to hide it,” I said. “I’m almost starting to think they’re holding her to use as leverage against my client to make him do or say something, but whatever they need him to do or say hasn’t happened yet and is being held up by something. That’s the only possible reason I can think of for no ransom note or demands. Besides, he’s just a beat cop, didn’t even know a thing about the Veil until his girl went missing.”

“I’d offer to help, Dale,” Bella said with a soft sigh, placing one of her oh so soft hands on my shoulder, “but you know vamps and fae rarely mix well. I don’t really have much in the way of contacts over there to aid you in your investigation.”

“Not her disappearance I’ve come to talk to you about,” I said to her, reaching into my satchel, pulling out the sketch of Viktor I’d made after he tossed us both out the window. “This the vamp you sent the danger signal up the flagpole about?”

“That’s the one,” she said, glancing at the sketch. “He your killer?”

“Fraid so,” I said. “What can you tell me about him?”

“Viktor Kolmach. Referred to us by Olga Treyonksy. Hails from Belarus. Has known connections to the K4...”

“What’s the K4?” I asked her.

“Soviet group of vampire gangsters,” she sighed. “I don’t like dealing with them, but as long as they don’t bring their business behind my walls, I can’t say too much about them, just because I don’t get their business mixed with mine. They’re into the usual ways to pressure people to make money – shakedowns, protection rackets, drugs, smuggling, weapons—”

“Smuggling?” I frowned, nodding. “That makes sense. They’re trying to get a Regent of Tides that’ll be a bit more flexible when it comes to their business, wanting to bring things in or take things out without doing the usual Dark Docks taxes and tariffs. I’m going to have to get someone who’s a great deal less lenient than I’d originally been looking at.”

“Who was your first choice?”

“Carlos Aquino.”

“Yeah, he’s a straight shooter,” Bella said to me. “He wouldn’t have tolerated any of their bullshit. He was the one who our vamp killed then?”

“Mmmm,” I said. “They were arguing and then when I burst in, Carlos had a couple of gunshot wounds in the chest, and Viktor was holding the gun.”

“Can’t get much plainer than that.”

“He’s lucky he threw us out the window,” I grumbled. “Otherwise I’d have put a SoulEnder round through him.”

“Fatal or no?”

I smirked a little bit, turning my head to cock and look at her. “How did you know that the SoulEnders have a non-fatal setting?”

“Always assumed there had to be, because I remember you putting down Billy Wix without killing him when you were dealing with that Pine Hunt nonsense a few years ago,” Bella said.

“Gods,” I mumbled. “I forgot that ended with a shootout out front of this very building. That was what, two, three years ago?”

“Something like that.”

“Shit, I need a goddamn *vacation*,” I groaned. “It’s been nonstop go go go since I took on this damn job. Oh well, no rest for the wicked. What can you tell me about where I can find this Viktor character?”

“He’s renting a flat out in Sunset Heights. I don’t know the unit number, but I can tell you the building and hopefully that’ll be enough for you to get what you need in terms of direction and where to be headed.”

“That sounds like a good start, thanks Bella.”

She grabbed a pad from a nearby table and scribbled down an address for me, tearing the sheet off and holding it out to me. “Don’t get yourself killed, though, huh, Gunslinger? I’ve grown to like our regular chats and drinks, even if you haven’t taken the hint to invite me out on a date yet.”

I smirked. “I didn’t think you were hinting; I thought you were trying to drum up business for the non-feeder half of the business,” I told her. “Never assume I can tell the difference between business and pleasure when it comes to people in your line of work.”

“Well then, consider this an open invitation if you want to take me out for drinks, dinner and dancing sometime.”

“Fair enough, I’ll try to remember that,” I told her with a nod. “Of course, you *do* also have *my* number, you know.”

“You aren’t going to assume it’s urgent Gunslinger business if I ring you up?”

“I’m just some guy like any other, Bella,” I said, starting to head towards the door. “My phone just connects you with me. It’s not the Dial-A-Bullet hotline.”

“One last thing before you go, Gunslinger,” she said to me as my hand was reaching out to rest on the door handle. “Do you want me to give you a free reading?”

The words sent dark chills along my spine and every sense I had and several I didn’t was telling me that I should run and never look back. But then the words of my late father crossed over my mind once more – ‘Anything that scares you should be considered with measured intensity and dismissed casually at your own peril.’

I lifted my hand up off the door and turned back to look at her. “Alright. Your readings were one of the few things I ever saw give my father pause, which is more the reason to rush towards it instead of away from it. I only have half an hour or so.”

“That’s all the time you’ll need,” she said, turning to head towards a door leading further into the house, as I stepped away from the front door and moved to join her. “Surely the great and all-powerful Druid Gunslinger isn’t afraid of a few potential future pathways?”

“*Everyone* is afraid of the future, Bella,” I cautioned her. “Those who aren’t have no reason to still be among the living.”

We walked down a hallway, past the normal rooms for feeding and fucking, and headed towards what I can only assume was the Countess’s personal office, as there was a table covered in velvet set off to one side underneath a particularly low mood light, draping the room in a cool orange glow, a second desk with a chair and a computer off to the other side of the room. She led me over to the table with two chairs, gesturing for me to sit down. “You know, I only read your father’s cards four times over the years. Once when he was made Gunslinger, once after your sister was born, once after *you* were born and one final time a year or two before he died,” she said, as she sat down on the opposite side of the table, unwrapping a bundle of silk cloth to remove a stack of well-loved cards from it, extending them to me. “Shuffle these until they feel comfortable in your hands. Think about whatever you’d like guidance on.”

As tempted as I was to look for guidance on the case, I figured I had a pretty solid handle on what I needed to do next in terms of finding our vampire, I was still no closer in trying to find Gao’s girlfriend, which was the case I *should’ve* been working on before I stumbled headfirst into this Tides nonsense. So I tried to focus on Saoirse Staire, thinking about the pictures he’d shown me, hoping maybe this would help me line up with the case, tell me where to start looking for her.

Almost as if she could read my mind, she smiled, reaching over and patting her hand on top of mine. “Don’t think of specifics. The cards aren’t going to give you an address. They’re going to give you a way of thinking about things, insight into what you may not have considered. But don’t expect details, otherwise you’re going to come away disappointed.”

I chuckled softly, letting the cards dance between my fingertips. “Trying to lower expectations?”

“Trying to help you get something useful from this, and hopefully it will encourage you to come back more,” she said with a wry grin. “I see your sister every few months.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, pushing the cards to slice and weave together. “She’s never mentioned it.”

“I think she’s afraid you’ll get the wrong idea about it.”

“And what wrong idea would that be?”

“That she needs guidance, rather than she likes making sure she’s not missing things.”

“My sister is entitled to do whatever she’d like whenever she’d like in her spare time, and I’m not going to judge her for those decisions.”

“Unless it comes to people she’s dating,” Bella scolded.

“Hey, my sister had a right to know what a brat that woman was when she started seeing her,” I said defensively. “That’s all I was doing – looking out for family.”

“You’re lucky your sister agrees with you. Not all family disputes are settled so amicably.”

I finished riffling the cards together and handed the deck back over to her. “Well, my sister and I get along remarkably well for having been at each other’s throats most of our childhoods. There’s your cards back. Now, tell me what the future holds.”

“This is a 6-card spread, focusing on self, wants, fears, forces in your favor, forces against, and the likely outcome. So, let us begin...” She flipped over the first card and it was a priestlike figure upside

down. “The Hierophant reversed – you see yourself as a new approach to the role of Gunslinger, someone subversive and unshackled by the traditions of the past. But take care not to veer too far from the trodden path, or you may find yourself without a light for guidance.”

“I’m a troublemaker,” I muttered to myself. “There’s a surprise.”

But she wasn’t paying attention to me and was already turning over the next card. “The Six Of Wands. This case means more to you than you may even want to admit to yourself, and you have banked a great deal of emotional investment on its outcome, one you are hoping will be nothing shy of complete and total success. Are you hoping to provide someone else a happy ending for fear you may never see one? Or is this simply the default in which operate – go until the job is done or lost, and no room for in between?”

I found her insight a little jarring, just because I’d always tried to project that a case, while important, would neither make nor break me, but there was something about Gao’s eyes that I kept seeing when I closed my own, a desperation, a longing, a needing to be reunited with she who held his heart. I’d never been in love like that with anyone or anything before. Something inside of me needed to bring these lovebirds back together again.

She turned over the third card and looked up at me. “The Ten of Cups in reverse. You fear that if you fail in this case, your client will never recover, dying young, a broken man. Not to be harsh, but your fears in this do not seem unfounded – this man has staked his entire mental well-being on your skills and success, and to fail him will be to doom him.”

Great, like I needed *more* pressure other than the calls and texts I was getting from Gao on the regular. Now she’s telling me his mortal soul’s bound up in this. Just great.

The fourth card is flipped, forces in my favor. “The Queen of Swords. Complexity. Insight. Perceptiveness. Focus. If anyone is capable of solving this mystery, Dale, it’s you, and you are the bloodhound upon which the case will rise and fall, but your skills should be more than up to the task.”

As she continued talking, I noticed a sense of electricity tingling up my arms, and I almost wondered for half a second if the table is rigged to an outlet or something, but lifting my hands off the table did nothing to quell the sparks and uncomfortable sensations raking up my arms.

The fifth card turns over, forces against me. “The Two of Wands in reverse. Your opponent in this matter is stubborn, afraid of change, a poor planner who does not adapt well to new things and new ideas, and they are so stuck in the past that they will drag down everyone and everything with them, if it helps them achieve their goals. They will do anything to prevent some potential change that lingers upon the air, undecided but likely.”

Glancing around me, I thought I could see ghosts of my ancestors surrounding me, the Gunslingers of generations before, before they started to blur together and my vision became slightly clouded with a diffuse light, obscuring details and blending everything into a sort of kaleidoscopic soup.

With the sixth and final card, the Tower in reverse. “Well, there’s a surprise. You’re going to get your victory, Gunslinger, but it’s going to be more complicated than you anticipated, as it’s going to affect a lot of your life in ways you can’t possible foresee yet. Just be prepared... a victory won’t be quite as clear cut as you’d want it to be... but you’ll make out fine in the end...”

The room snaps back into focus and suddenly all the strange sensations and weird lights and colors disappeared, and I was simply back in Bella’s office once more.

“Any time you want another reading, Gunslinger, it’s on the house...”

“Yeah... Sure... I gotta go, Bella...”