

Minor Errands
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Early October

“Houseware? Hardware? I need a demonware section,” Alex complained under his breath. He turned around in the middle of the aisles, taking in three hundred and sixty degrees of cheap consumer goods and red bullseye logos announcing sale prices. None of it marked what he wanted. At this hour, there weren’t many attendants left to point the way. “This should not be so fucking hard.”

The downtown outlet occupied a narrower footprint than the store Alex was used to on the north end. This store rose up through several floors with its different sections spread out on top of one another. In fairness, Alex wouldn’t have known where to find what he was looking for at the other store, either, but the sight lines were wider. He stood a better chance of randomly spotting his goals there.

Life held greater challenges than this. He couldn’t get too upset over product placement and his own ignorance. Not after the things he’d endured and survived last month, and surely not in light of all the comforts and joys he held now. He could abandon this errand, go home to easy living and carnal playtime, and leave the chores to someone else’s time and money...someone else who was all too happy to provide. He knew how she felt about time and money.

Alex still wanted to pull his own weight. Somehow.

“It’s not in hardware,” he said after a second check. “It’s gotta be in houseware.” He turned around again. Where the hell was houseware? Did he even have the right name for it? Did they call it something else here? Did he move to a new neighborhood and accidentally wind up in a new commercial paradigm?

He found the escalator again before he found houseware. The sign corrected him. He let out a sigh as he climbed onto the stairs, interrupted by the buzz of his cell phone. Alex expected a message from Lorelei, only to find the name of another new joy—one he wasn’t sure how to navigate at all. Or if he even should.

“Missed you in photography today,” read the text from Onyx.

The text made him wince. Hell, seeing her name made him wince. He wanted to see more of her, and her girlfriend Molly, but his doubts held him back. They had a great time together. It had only been a couple of weeks, but he had to figure out how to navigate a second multiple relationship on top of the one he was already in.

He had to figure it out before the chance went away entirely.

“Yeah, sorry,” he replied. “With the move-in and all the other new stuff on top of work has me juggling. We’re still getting settled.”

Her reply came fast. She must be looking at her phone. “That’s all it is?”

Another wince. He couldn’t blame her for being frustrated, or doubtful. He had to fix this. “It takes some adjusting. Also shopping. So much shopping.”

At the top of the escalator, Alex stepped out of the way and looked around for an open spot. He saw only one man over by the rack of travel-sized grooming supplies, and that guy had his face half-covered by a cell phone, too. It offered the safest, least-inconsiderate backdrop for a selfie. Alex raised his phone to his face and snapped the picture.

“Any idea where they keep the closet shelving?” he asked, and hit send.

Three dots in a dialogue box appeared almost immediately, heralding a reply. He waited, looking at the screen and his selfie...and looked closer. Then he looked over his shoulder.

The same stranger remained at the supply bins with his cell phone still against the side of his face. His dark suit seemed a little faded with age.

He didn’t appear at all in the selfie.

A reply from Onyx buzzed in his hand: “Lot of ways to take a question about closets.”

He glanced over his shoulder again, only now realizing the guy at the racks did much the same. They didn’t make eye contact, but Alex noted his body language. Whatever his phone conversation was about, it seemed urgent, or perhaps angry. The guy practically hissed.

Alex kept his eyes on his phone to look disinterested as he moved around the other side of the rack. He fired off a laughing emoji in reply to Onyx, but his attention turned to eavesdropping. Thankfully, the racks were both thin and riddled with a pattern of holes.

“You’re not listening to me,” the man hissed. Alex blinked at his accent. Was that Australian? “They’re gone. All of them. I’m sure of it. Anastasia, Blackthorne, the whole court. Everyone on the low end I knew, too. It’s been a couple weeks now. I’ve laid low ‘cause I’m not stupid, but I can’t find anyone.”

A chill ran through the younger man's body. His arms tensed, one hand curling into a fist. He wondered when and if he might run into another of these guys. He expected to be frightened. The couple of nightmares he'd had since the abduction tended toward fear and helplessness. Now he had one of these monsters right outside arm's reach but for the toothpaste rack between them and he felt no fear. Instead, he felt anger. Cold, resentful, purposeful anger. The tension in his arms built to a tremor aching to be unleashed.

That was new.

"I'm telling you, someone took them all out. Anastasia's court and the Brotherhood. They dragged a couple prisoners into the party to make some demon happy and then everything went to shit. No, I told you. I was in another room having a snack. I don't know what started it. Are you feeding off cokeheads again? Jesus."

Alex took in his surroundings. Shaving supplies sat next to the dental care stuff, but safety razors weren't exactly useful. The straight edge razors were all behind a locked plastic cabinet. *Straight edges?* Alex caught himself. *I'm in a Target. This guy is a vampire. What the hell am I thinking?*

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure whoever the court kidnapped turned the tables on them. I don't know the story, but I saw the guy running around taking people out before I escaped. I know what they look like. Can't be too hard to find them if we try. They're the only complication around taking this whole fucking city."

Nope. Nope. Nope. Fuck this guy. Alex took in the rest of his surroundings. Long shelves of hair care stretched out behind him. He could flame this guy with hair spray if he had a lighter, but he didn't. Also, there was the matter of being in public with security cameras all around. *One thing at a time. One thing at—* His head twitched. The next aisle held automotive supplies. *Who the hell arranged the layout of this store? And how do I thank them?*

Alex rounded the aisle and picked up what he needed without breaking his stride. He didn't even have to worry about packaging. "Thank you," he muttered under his breath, though it came out of habit rather than thought. If his guardian angel were around to hear his gratitude, she would probably have grabbed his ass by now. She would also take care of this problem for him.

He didn't think give it a second thought. He wanted to pull his own weight.

"No, I'm not calling you for money," the Australian went on. "If I was hard up, I'd just take a wallet or two while getting my nightly snacks. I've done it before. No, I'm calling because this is

an opportunity. We can take this city. I can recruit on my own, but I need experienced hands to make the most of this. Until then I have to lay low. The only reason I haven't been disappeared like all the others is because I'm smarter than the rest. I'm a survivor."

Alex joined him at the aisle, facing the travel-sized product bins. He waited only seconds before the Australian cast him an irritable glance—and then an alarmed double-take. "What's up?" Alex nodded.

The Australian took a reflexive step back. Alex turned and stepped in to close the distance. In the same moment, the stranger noticed the road flare Alex held low in both hands. Alex wanted the guy to see his grip on the plastic cap, ready to tear and burn.

"Hang up the phone," Alex told him quietly.

The Australian sneered, revealing more of his fangs than he probably intended. "You can't be serious. We're in public."

"That's my advantage, not yours," said Alex. "I'll have all the time I need to find a lawyer. How fast do you think you'll find a fire extinguisher?"

"Mike?" asked the voice over the phone. "Mike, what's going on?"

"Hang up the phone, Mike," Alex repeated.

Mike scowled in frustration. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"Don't make me chase you, Mike," said Alex. "I found you once already."

Fuming, Mike killed the connection and lowered his phone. At a raised eyebrow from Alex he stopped short of putting the phone back in his pocket. "What do you want?"

Shit. I hadn't thought that far, Alex considered. If anything, Alex wanted to lop the vampire's head off. He didn't have the weapon for that at all, but the urge came to him like a voice shouting in his head. Several voices.

If he still held all those memories of his past lives, they weren't as clear as they'd been the night of the party. He didn't know if he still had all that fighting prowess, but he sure felt all those same impulses. That explained why he was so ready for confrontation now. He didn't have a blade or a gun, but he had their urges. He had their priorities.

"I want your wallet, your phone, and your car keys," said Alex.

"What?"

"Put them in the bin with the deodorant. Slowly."

Mike scowled. Mike glared. Mike growled.

“Motherfucker, you are the last vampire in Seattle and I will take you out like all the rest.”

Mike complied.

“What now?” grunted the vampire.

Alex still didn’t have an answer for that. In truth, Mike was right about his bad position. Alex really didn’t want this fight—not against a vampire, and not in the middle of a store. He couldn’t stand down from this, either. He held the upper hand. He had to hold it for dear life. Instincts he remembered from other men impressed the importance of advancing on an opponent rather than giving ground or room to maneuver. He didn’t want to fight, but he had to push. Hard.

“It’s time to run, Mike,” said Alex. “Run your little ass out of this store, out of downtown, out of this city. Run for your life. Don’t lay a finger on anyone else on your way out, either. Don’t let me catch you here again or you’ll end up like the rest.”

Mike’s eyes narrowed. “That’s it?”

“The emergency exit is straight down the aisle there,” Alex said with a nod. “Don’t make me chase you out.”

The vampire stepped back. He stepped again. Alex moved forward. With that, Mike turned and ran.

Alex raised his eyebrows at the vampire’s speed. In a reminder of the deadly advantages any vampire enjoyed over mortals, Mike cleared the distance before Alex finished his next breath. He rushed past cleaning products, past pet supplies, past—*oh shit, there’s all the shelving kits!* Then, in the blink of an eye, Mike slammed through the emergency door without a look back.

A slender arm rose up to clothesline Mike before he took a third step past the doorway. His feet flew up in front of him as his head and shoulders pivoted around the arm and fell backward. As the door swung shut again, Alex caught a glimpse of a white dress and a flash from a flaming sword. Then the door covered up the ending.

White text on a red label across the door warned of an alarm that hadn’t gone off. Alex frowned. Someone should really report that.

The wallet in the deodorant bin turned out to be fat with cash. Alex remembered what he had seen of the other vampires. They were generally old fashioned. This guy had adjusted to cell phones, but Alex wondered how far his modernity went.

“I am so fucking hot for you right now,” whispered a mouth at his ear. The tension of possible violence quickly drained from his body, becoming a tension of a different sort. Rachel slipped

her arms around him. Her mouth trailed to his neck to add, “Don’t ever do that again,” before she gnawed on him.

“Sorry. Impulse.”

“Sexy impulse.” Her hands trailed down his abdomen. The caress ended at his crotch, where it turned to an affectionate, hungry grip. “Fucking hot justice and smiting of evil impulses.”

“You gonna be able to control yourself until I get home?” he teased.

“Not sure, but we could always—aww.” Rachel pouted. “Damn it, I just left a pile of vampire ashes in the emergency stairwell. It’s gonna stink.”

“They’ve really gotta check the alarm circuits over in that corner,” said Alex. He pocketed the belongings from his vanquished foe and walked with Rachel to the closet shelves.

“What’cha gonna do with the spoils of war?” the angel asked.

“Pay for this errand, at least,” said Alex. “This isn’t a problem for you? Seems kinda sinful.”

“Nah. Robbing is one thing, reclamation is another. That guy was a fucking undead parasite. You’re one of the living. Not like he has any use for that shit anymore, anyway.” Rachel grinned. “Also it was kinda hot.”

“You were watching the whole time?”

“No. I only caught up in the last couple seconds. He could’ve really hurt you if he had read the situation better. That’s why I’m telling you not to do it again.” She clung to his arm as they walked, sliding up against him fully when he stopped at the shelving aisle. “But it was also righteous and brave and you know how that gets me.”

“Oh yeah?” Alex grinned back at the angel. “What happens if I figure out his PIN number and dump the rest of his bank balance into the food bank donation bin on the way out of here?”

Rachel’s eyes widened. She grabbed him by the lapels of his leather jacket and pushed him back into the merchandise rack before attacking him with an aggressive, hungry kiss.