

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.”