

## 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 network 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.”