

"Professor Markel said it's completely fine as long as you two stay within Vandice. You both will be fine on your own, right?" I asked Ines and Ange as they were getting ready to leave at the door.

Ines was scratching her head and staring into her phone with a scowl. I'd have thought she would be more excited to go out drinking to kill some stress. With the end of December fast approaching, she had end of term papers and exams to deal with. Stress was showing on her face as eyebags even despite the layer of foundation and eyeshadow.

"Oh, yeah! We're going to be just peachy. I called a rideshare for us," the college student absentmindedly said.

Call it a caretaker's intuition, but it seemed like something was up. I hope I was overthinking it.

Ange snapped me from my thoughts by throwing her arms around me.

"Of course, we'll be fine. A few drinks, maybe until Ines becomes far too inebriated to walk, and we shall come straight home or find a place to rest until morning," Ange said, going through a mental checklist of what we discussed earlier.

"You act like *I'm* the one getting wasted. I'll have you know, even frat boys have a hard time drinking my under." Ines folded her arms and smirked as if issuing a challenge.

"Something tells me the night can only end in one way when it comes to humans and the bottom of a cup." The succubus fired back.

It would be the first time I let my tenants go out on their own. Professor Markel did insist that it would be fine. After all, they had to learn to grow independent from my help. Although, this was more of a test for Ange. Ines was only here for the ride.

The college chick wore a military green, long-sleeve winter jacket with a fox-fur hood over her sexy, open-back black dress. I had only caught a glimpse when I went to check on her in her room. Currently, the half-inch heels of her outfit were all that was visible underneath all the layers.

On the other hand, Ange decided against wearing anything nice and opted instead for the succubus outfit she normally wore.

"Our ride's here!" Ines exclaimed at the same time a notification popped up on her phone

"Be safe out there! Take care of each other!" I shouted to their backs.

"Oh, man. I'm so excited! The place we're going to is a club at the top of a highrise. They have a sweet heated pool. I got the idea after soaking in the dorm's hot tub—"

Ines ran her mouth like a gatling gun about the club they were going to, and Ange nodded every now and then when it piqued her interest.

While by the door, I counted down the minutes after they had left.

I went upstairs and threw on a jacket, then put a baseball cap on and pulled the large hood over. This should be enough to stay hidden, unless Ange had keen senses I didn't know about yet.

"Alright. Time to stalk the girls..."

"Where are you going?" a judging voice asked just as I got to the front door.

My back straightened to Cresta by the kitchen entrance, tapping her foot, arms crossed over her chest.

"Uhh... Just to get some late night snacks?" I answered unconvincingly. "Fine. I was going to follow them to make sure they were safe. Can't help but be worried."

Cresta raised an eyebrow. "So much for putting your trust in Ange and Ines."

Tailing them was a big middle finger. It was clear I didn't trust them to stay out of trouble, and if anything happened, I couldn't be sure Ange wouldn't resort to magic. A pair of cute girls going out at night for drinks? There were bound to be a couple of unsavory folks with bad intentions looking to take advantage of that.

Obviously I was troubled by a lot more than just that. There were millions of better guys out there than me. I was only lucky enough to hook up with Ange due to my caretaker role. Seeing her leave the dorm without me by her side stirred uncomfortable feelings that made me feel unworthy to her.

"I know... I just can't sit still. Kind of like your assassin's intuition, I have a feeling something might happen tonight," I explained.

"In that case, I'm coming with you. It's getting late, and I don't want *you* getting hurt either," Cresta said, seemingly eager for a late night adventure herself.

Having Cresta come along would take a load off my shoulders. Not that I was hoping for things to go awry, but in the event that they did, she could handle everything.

I knew exactly what club Ines was talking about earlier— Gran View Heights. A high end club where women were given free entry and booze, and only men born into wealth could enter. That was just the top floor. The rest of the floors below were just a casino and restaurants.

Downtown Vandice was a different beast. It had nowhere near as many or tall buildings like Los Angeles or New York. The highest building went up to twelve floors, one floor short of calling itself a high rise. Most of them were residential apartments packed to the brim with people who would commute to neighboring cities for work in the morning, then returned to the luxuries of this city by night. That was a major factor in contributing to its booming nightlife.

Even as I drove down the avenue at ten in the evening, way past any normal people should be out, the streets were packed and nightlifers braved the cold on foot to get into clubs, bars, and spas.

Flashing neon signs advertising the debaucherous entertainment they offered lit up the city more than street lights could. Dulled, but booming bass music could be heard as I passed by clubs. I quickly turned to check on Cresta and was relieved to find her perfectly okay, even swaying from side to side and vibing to the music.

"You really okay not putting on your ear muffs?" I asked her.

"I brought it just in case! Haven't really had any use for it lately ever since that time you almost got run over," Cresta said.

Cresta springing into action despite the car horn and thunder blasting must have helped her overcome loud noises. I wondered what brought that sort of trauma to begin with. Could it have to do with when she failed to assassinate her target way back then?

Turning my eyes back to the road, I recognized Gran View Heights building by the smooth and modern architecture. The Aphrodite statue pouring water into a fountain in front of the plaza was also a dead giveaway. Blinking lights and a DJ's voice echoing from the rooftop was evidence that people were partying hard. The top was surrounded by a tall glass and metal partition, separating clubgoers from a fall. Should that ever happen, the floor below it appeared wide enough to catch anyone that fell.

"Uwah... I can smell the booze and sex even while inside the car. You humans really like the party," Cresta said, face pressed to the window.

"How do Weyerans let loose?" I asked. "Can't imagine drinking and partying is any less crazy over there."

"I only know that Pesha and Tarcosa would walk around with entire casks of wine. If either of them gets too wasted, they'd have a healer cure them, then go right back to chugging." She giggled at the memories.

"Hmm... I think having those healers on Earth would probably encourage more people to become alcoholics..."

We looked for a place to park, but Gran View's underground parking lot was at full capacity. I pulled into a shady lot surrounded by chain-link fencing on the other side of the street and paid a whole Andrew Jackson to get in. Even in this one I had a hard time finding an open space.

When I finally found a place to park, I turned off the ignition and left the heater on to keep us warm.

"Oooh. This is starting to feel like how I used to go on assassination missions and stalk my targets. Except, the night usually ends with someone dying. We aren't killing anyone, are we?" Cresta asked, ears twitching with nostalgic anticipation.

"No, we're not! We're only here to make sure the two of them are fine," I said, keeping my eyes on the Gran View's roof.

There was no telling what might happen to them while under the influence. Ange being a succubus was undoubtedly going to draw attention. I'd hear stories of girls getting roofied. Who knows what someone might try to do, seeing an opportunity to get close to either of them. Her using magic to get someone being too pushy off her back was also bad.

Until I saw with my own two eyes of them taking a cab back home or to a hotel, I couldn't rest easy.

The two of us snacked on greasy food we bought at a nearby convenience store in the meantime. Cresta was apparently used to spending up to days on assassination missions, and staking out wasn't too bad for me since I was the one who wanted to do it.

"So how come you didn't go with them? I thought you'd give any chance to get steamy with Ines and Ange," Cresta said.

"Because I'm three years too young to drink in the States. Clubs also aren't my kind of thing. I'll end up being a wallflower, awkwardly moving to the beat of the music in an attempt to fit in," I replied without shame.

That was just how I was. Lock me in my room with a computer and that was a good night for me. Extroverts like Ines, on the other hand, needed more stimulation than a digital screen full of pixels.

After a few hours had passed, the girls were still in the club and I was beginning to doze off. Cresta maintained a vigilant watch. All I could think was that American college girls sure were party animals to stay up this long.

"Hey." Cresta tapped my shoulder.

I followed her finger out the side of her passenger window. Behind a row of cars against the chain fence were a group of men in thick puffer jackets and beanies.

At first glance, they didn't look any different from other folks on the street. But the longer I watched, the more I realized that it looked like something shady was going down. Their clothes were baggy and oversized, many of them were inked up, and a distinct outline on the side of their pants couldn't possibly be mistaken for anything else.

My knee jerk reaction was not to judge them at first glance, but when one of them passed a ziplock bag filled with a white powdery substance, I knew this had to be some drug exchange.

"I heard one of them say Ines' name," Cresta said.

"Could it just be coincidence?" I asked, squinting to get a better look.

She shook her head. "They've said her name multiple times now. One of them even mentions that a 'netherfolk' is with her. I think Ange being with Ines got them kind of confused."

Those guys out there were definitely acting suspicious. Although I couldn't rule out the possibility that it might be nothing, I'd rather err on the side of caution for my tenants.

For now, sending Professor Markel a heads up should be enough. I didn't expect him to send a cavalry, but should things go south, he was in the know in advance.

"Should I do something about it?" Cresta asked as her hunter mode turned on.

"Not yet. As long as they don't do anything, it's fine. We shouldn't provoke a fight either, or you're the one getting in trouble."

Another hour passed, and the men hadn't left. We identified two of their cars, a compact vehicle and a shabby pickup truck. Some of them lounged inside the vehicles, and others smoked by the car hood. One man in particular, sitting in the driver's seat of the van had cornrows and a goatee, was keeping an eye on the club entrance while chewing on his thumbnail.

He suddenly leaned forward as something caught his attention. I followed his gaze to the club. Ines had stumbled out, clearly inebriated. She had an arm around Ange's shoulder, who was trying to keep her steady.

One guy whispered something into the goatee guy's ear and snickered only to get shoved hard to the ground.

"What did that guy say?" I asked Cresta.

"*Looks like your girl left you to chase after netherfolk lesbos*, is what he said," she replied, then made a confused face. "What's a lesbo?"

"I'll tell you later." I patted her on the head.

It looked like Ange was tapping into a phone. I received a text a moment later from Ines' phone telling me they were going to hunker down for the night at Marshland Hotel, just like I suggested to them earlier in the day.

Ange hailed a cab, and as the two entered, the shady guys in the parking lot got into their cars and started the engines.

"I don't like the look that guy's giving them." Cresta growled menacingly.

"So they really were after Ines," I muttered to myself.

Why? Did they have some sort of history with each other?

"I can stop them all in a blink of an eye. Just give me the word," the assassin said, unsheathing her claws.

Those guys were clearly up to no good. But could we really just confront them without them doing something yet?

Professor Markel left me on 'read' in my text message to his secured number.

You can at least respond back! I thought to myself.

I was in my mind for too long, and they had already exited the parking lot. Without wasting another second, I started the car and followed them from a distance.

Marshland Hotel had three floors and was shaped like the letter U. The place wasn't the most popular or largest place compared to its competitors like the J.W Marriott down the street. While not cheap by a longshot, it was luxury at a bargain and had many amenities to enjoy: a bar, restaurant, pools, spa, and a gym.

I pulled up into the parking lot of a convenience store across the street. Ines and Ange exited the cab to head into the hotel. Fortunately, Marshland didn't have its own parking structure like other big hotels, only a load and drop off zone in front of the building. The two cars that were tailing them had to park much further down the street.

My heart was racing. They wouldn't actually try something in public, would they? Was I actually about to confront them?

The last thing I wanted was for anything to happen to Ines and Ange.

I let out all the air in my lungs and steeled my nerves. "Hooo... Alright. If anything goes wrong—"

"Nothing's happening to you on my watch," Cresta assured me.

We jumped out of the van to intercept the thugs as they came down the sidewalk. Cresta had her hood pulled over so as to not draw their attention.

They were a group of seven. If they got to Ines, then Ange would have no choice but to use magic to defend against them. I didn't want her in such a position that might risk her status in staying here, especially not with Christmas coming.

"Don't act until I say so, or unless you *really* sense we're in danger," I whispered.

As we passed them, I purposely bumped hard into one guy's shoulder. Almost as if it was the natural thing to do, he shoved me with both hands. I fell into a tall landscaped bush and caught myself on the branches.

"You got a fucking problem, kid?" He sized me up while I was trying to pull myself out of the bush.

Under the flickering streetlight, I saw the tattoos on some of their faces. Several of them had a familiar mix of numbers and letters on their faces. 'EV14SB' was tattooed under the right eye among others.

These guys were gangsters all right, and I was in over my head.

"Leave 'em. The fuck you slowing down for?" the guy with the goatee shouted to his friend.

Say something, I urged myself as they were leaving. *Now wasn't the time to be a little shit!*

"Y-You guys are after Ines Diaz, aren't you?" I asked, causing them to turn around at once, then threw a glance at the one with the goatee. "I don't know what you're planning to do, but you leave her alone for good."

He took a long drag of the cigarette in his mouth as he walked up to me, then blew the smoke into my face. "Bro, you got five seconds to tell me who the fuck you are, or I waste you."

A million different things popped in my head. I thought the cold sweat beading down my face were icy talons. For whatever reason, only a single thing crossed my mind to say right then.

"The... uh... guy who got a taste of how good Ines' blowjobs are," I answered, staring him straight in the eyes.

In the corner of my eyes I saw him reach for his gun. When he raised it, however, the barrel split into four pieces and fell to the ground. The others panicked and went for their weapons but grabbed their underwear instead. Their pants dropped to their ankles, and Cresta had already diced up every single gun.

"What the fuck?" Goatee-guy stared in disbelief.

My phone suddenly buzzed with a notification. I pulled it out to see a text from Professor Markel.

It read in such a way that I could hear his slightly irked voice: *That's my cue, I suppose.*

"Freeze! Get on the ground and put your hands behind your head!"

Three armored vehicles pulled up to the curb with a dozen military personnel quickly swarming the scene. Cresta and I stepped back to let them apprehend the gangsters. The in my body vanished in an instant, leaving me weak in the knees.

"I... I really appreciate you guys, but once again I have to ask— Isn't this a little *too* excessive?" I asked Professor Markel as he rolled the window down from the passenger side of his vehicle.

"You're a government asset, Akira. Though, I would prefer you not put yourself in harm's way going forward. It gets costly." The professor pointed to the air where a helicopter circled into view, a sniper waved from the open door.

"American taxpayers, forgive me..." I muttered.

Professor Markel explained to me, from what information gathered through local police precincts, that EV14SB was a street gang originating from San Bernardino. The man with the goatee was a known gangbanger, in and out of prison, multiple felonies, the works. Apparently, and this was likely why this information was omitted from Ines' case files, she had run-ins with the gang in her youth, but wasn't a member herself or ever committed any crimes.

The tattoo across her chest must have been the start of her initiation, and for them to be long faded likely meant she got out of there early. I was glad for that. Ines had helped me plenty after all. She meant a lot to me and the other tenants, and while it would have been nice to collect on this favor, I was content to leave this matter resolved by an anonymous guardian angel. A past like that was best left buried, especially since she never brought it up to me.

The professor and his people departed so as to not draw too much of a crowd. Onlookers had the time of their lives, taking pictures and videos, but they were just as quick to go back to partying once the commotion was over. I just hoped Ange and Ines didn't look out their window.

"Well, that was the most fun I had all month! Can we do that again sometime?" Cresta asked, stretching her arms after a job well done.

"No!" I promptly replied "I might be safe thanks to you and Professor Markel, but I was scared half to death."

"Awww. But your intuition turned out to be right. Maybe you do have what it takes to be an assassin," she teased.

"Honestly, it was a lot more... selfish than that. Anyway, there's one more thing I want to do before going home."

We went inside Marshland Hotel, where a receptionist behind the counter lifted his head and expressed surprise when he saw Cresta.

"Not looking for a room. Just wanted to ask if you checked in a woman named Ines Diaz and a netherfolk named Angeline Varcas?" I asked him.

He narrowed his eyes at me, then Cresta, and cleared his throat before finally speaking. "I'm afraid I can't share information about our hotel guests with other guests."

"That won't be a problem." I pulled out my government-issued caretaker ID card for him to inspect. "Just like this netherfolk next to me, those two are under my supervision."

The gears were turning in his head. "Oh, my. Is this a case of them running away? I'm terribly sorry if—"

I shook my head because I could tell he was quickly coming to the wrong conclusion.

"I'm just here to make sure they're having a good time. I'd like to upgrade their room to the best one you got."

He adjusted his glasses and switched his attention to the computer screen in front of him. After typing into the keyboard for a few seconds, he nodded with approval at what he found.

"As it turns out, we have an open executive suite. It is furnished with one king-sized bed, a living room, a bathroom with hot tub and sauna functionalities, a bar, and 70-inch flat screen TV. The cost comes out to \$1,350 per night," the receptionist recited as a matter of factly.

I recoiled hard. This was going to cut into some of my expenses.

"Two nights for that suite, please." I handed them my credit card.

"Very good. I can send them a complimentary bottle of wine with your name," he suggested.

"Ehh. Just say it was from Santa." I smiled.