

Rhest and the Escort

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I hate escort duty.

Not the generic operation. No, I love escort missions. They're usually easy work that involves minimal shooting, little stress, and a whole lot of sitting around. I love escort missions. They're the bread-n-butter of the mercenary profession. Escort duty is a little bit different. Escort duty is what street mercs call a specific type of escort mission: it's where we escort escorts. Don't know what an escort is? You're either playing dumb or are dumb, because everybody knows the world's oldest profession. I certainly do. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

So I'm sitting in the back of Headlinerz Club (I guess the Z means the women are sexier?). Headlinerz is one of those almost-nice clubs that's open only for a couple of years before it either gets shut down because of some drug bust or goes to hell because of dwindling patronage. Fortunately, it's still a fairly upscale place on this night. Nice subdued carpets. Little sectioned-off areas to cater to different types of interests. Lots of really, really lovely women.

Headlinerz is a strip club. A pretty high-end one in the grand scheme of things. Oh no, not one of those absurd 'corporate entertainment venues'. No, not those places where guys slip hundred-dollar bills into the dancers' who-ha. No, this is a public club (though they still require getting a membership because of antiquated laws) over on the west side.

It's got a jam space, which is basically just a rave where the dancers act really licentious (I mean, you know, more so than most ravers already do). There's a bar, where things are a little calmer and the women are a bit more conversational. And there's the main stage, which is your traditional club with the pole, the platforms, and all that business.

I'm not anywhere in there. I'm in the back, sitting in the corner, arguing with some idiot online with my phone. Yes, despite being heavily cybered (which is pretty much a job requirement these days), I have an external hand-held cell phone. I just don't like having communication devices installed, you know? I've heard too many horror stories of companies, or just employees of companies, or just hackers, jacking into somebody's thoughts and stuff. So yeah, no.

As I'm explaining to some moron as to why fluoride is NOT mind control and there's no reason to invent conspiracies when there are plenty of genuine ones already out there, Scott McIntire comes and sits down with me. He pulls a chair over and straddles it, sitting backwards. "Hey," he says.

I hold up a finger and finish my social media diatribe. "Sorry," I say as I hit post. "Someone is wrong on the Internet. Can't let that stand." He chuckles as away goes the phone. "Yeah."

"So, Sapphire gets done in ten minutes," explains Scott. "She wanted me to make sure you know where she's going."

Scott is the floor manager of the strip club. That means he's part human resources, part server, part auxiliary bouncer. He's also part scheduling coordinator, DJ, and pretty much any job that needs doing at a moment's notice. In this moment's notice, he's acting as Eleonore 'Sapphire' Harowitz' agent. She's

the one who hired me; he's just acting as an intermediary from her primary job to her secondary position. Which is awfully nice of him.

Scott takes from his suit jacket a business card and hands it to me. I study his contact info, surprised it includes social media. "Sapphire wants to take the metro to the location in question. She's meeting her client and interacting with him at a public venue. While it's her job, it concerns the club, so I want to make sure she's protected." Does he mean her, or the club's reputation? Given his earnest look, I'm inclined to think this is one of the few halfway decent guys left in Sacramento. "After a socialization period, anything that transpires between the gentleman who has reserved her time and she is not the club's business."

I check the card again and realize that Scott gave me a second card beneath his own contact info. It's a business card for a hotel and event center. I don't immediately recognize the address but based off the zip code, it's a good ways away. "Does she know the man that's reserved the time? And how much time?"

"An hour or so, I believe, and I don't think she knows him," Scott tells me. "He's not a regular here, I know that. You guys can discuss the particulars of what she's arranged on your way there. It is possible that she may pick up an additional arrangement or two, which I'll also let her arrange with you. She may decline any on-site scheduling; she may be all for it. Regardless, her safety is..." He just gestures at me and the obviousness of my role.

I nod and pocket the cards into one of the pockets in my combat harness. I start to ask something when the door opens and two women in nothing but gloves and thigh-highs come inside, all smiles and sexuality. The instant the door shuts and they can't be seen by the audience outside however, they turn into scowls and start griping about the guys who stiffed them on tips or tried to get handsy. Me and Scott stay turned away, giving them as much privacy as we can in the locker room/dressing room/storage.

"I'm on your dime escorting her to and from the site, just not while she's...entertaining," I clarify.

"You're on her dime entirely," Scott clarifies as he rocks back a bit in the chair. Doing so betrays his youth. He could pass for underage, he could be in his thirties, it all depends on the angle he's standing at. "This is all her. We have a standing contract with another agency, but since this is solely her gig and her arrangement, it seemed easiest to contract out to not our usual agency."

"Who is your usual agency?" I ask, simply curious.

"Manfried," he says, like he's not sure if I know why they are.

"Manfried Personal Security," I nod. "Yeah, I know those guys. They're good people." I'm a lying bastard. Most of Manfried's mercs are ex-military types who don't know what to do with themselves now that they don't have anybody paying them to kill foreigners. A few of them are on the ball but most of them are military washouts who should be getting treatment and rehab, not pay-by-the-bullet. Not that my agency is much better. Macee's Staffing Agency will basically hire anybody that walks in off the street. Our survival rate is kind of dismal. Our turnover rate, even more so. But that's neither here nor there.

"So yeah," he says. "Anyway, after it's over, escort her home. We'll process the actual deal, with Sapphire paying us, so submit time for the visit and the escort to and from and we'll pay it."

"I thought that was on her dime," I say.

"It is, but we'll pay it against her next check," he explains. He shrugs. "Saves on paperwork and transaction costs." That doesn't make sense to me, but it doesn't have to make sense. The check just has to clear.

"Do you expect any trouble?" I ask Scott. "I've done gigs like this before, but every little bit of info helps."

"The dance is for a party. I assume it's a bachelor's party?" he specifies uncertainly. "I don't know if it's the groom who booked the hour afterwards or what."

I nod. "Has the reservee...reserver...has the person who placed the reservation already paid?" Scott nods.

That's bad. Apparently, I convey that with my expression because he asks, "Is that bad?"

I waffle a little as we sit. "If we get there and Sapphire decides it isn't safe, decides not to go through with it, then the guys that have paid in advance can get a little extra-possessive, even if you assure them they'll get refunded." Scott nods, not unfamiliar with that problem.

I'm about to say something more, I don't remember what, when the door opens again and in steps a goddess. Sapphire is a dark-skinned beauty that would make Nefertiti feel inadequate and Helen of Troy look like a beauty pageant also-ran. She's got long, smooth black hair that goes down to her waist and one of those perfect bodies that's like equal parts smooth and equal parts hard, like she's definitely an athlete but still has this innate femininity to her. Calling her proportions 'divine' feels inadequate.

Scott can clearly tell I'm mesmerized because he points out that I'm staring with a subtle, "Dude."

I shake out of it. "Wow, sorry," I say. I scrub my face. "Man..." I stare into the distance.

"Yeah, for real," Scott assures me. He stands and says, "I'm going to go touch base with her, then get back out on the floor. Nice meeting you and if you've got any problems, give me a call. My number's on the card."

"Thanks man," I tell him as we shake hands.

He heads into the locker room and I wait in my seat, facing the corner. I check the internet and find out Captain Anti-Fluoridation has responded with further insipidness. This distracts me for a while.

Almost half an hour passes before Sapphire comes over to the chair across from me. She's wearing yoga pants and a tank top that seems to float in front of her due to her breasts which can only be described as godly. She's brushing her

hair, tiny droplets of water from her shower coming off with each stroke. "Rhest?" she asks with a smile that would melt the coldest heart.

"Hey," I say, extending my hand. She giggles a little at the awkwardness and then shakes my hand with the brush in hers. Her head's cocked to her right shoulder so that her hair is draped down in front of her. "I'll be escorting you this evening," I tell her. God, her eyes are this amazing deep brown. They're almost black and it's like staring into the sky. Holy crap!

She smiles. I don't know if it's a professional smile, gleaned from years of knowing full well what her effect is on men or if she's genuinely still amused by how gullible my gender is. "Thanks for accepting the contract," she tells me before she nudges Scott's chair around and sits properly in it. She keeps brushing her hair. "You've got an impressive success and approval rating at your agency."

"Thanks," I say. I feel like I'm at an interview. "I'm very proud of it."

"How many working women have you worked with?" she asks me conversationally as she continues to remove water from hair so perfect, it could be in a painting.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly. "Maybe a few dozen, total? I probably get a job like that a few times a year, at least. Most escorts have dedicated bodyguards so they don't contract out to staffing agencies all that often."

She nods and shifts her hair to the other side and leans her head to the left shoulder. I can see a tattoo on her collar. It's a subtle, mostly black tattoo of a little witch I recognize from an online cartoon from when I was younger. I can't remember the name. It was popularish. I squint for a second, curious why she would have that across her clavicle, and for it to be tilted slightly off-balance. I realize it's probably covering up some older tattoo.

I very quickly figure out that the woman sitting in front of me may be beautiful beyond reasoning, but likely has a history beyond reckoning.

"I want to make a stop," I announce as me and Sapphire head out of the back of the club. Under the light of a solitary street lamp, we head down a graffitied alley towards the street.

"What for?" she asks, curious but not bothered. She brushes her long hair outside of the heavy coat she's pulled over a gorgeous ballroom dress. Her heels clack with each step.

"I want to have cash on hand for the reservation," I tell her. I'm watching traffic, yelling over the passing cars. "If you don't want to go through with the deal, I want to be able to give the guy the money then and there, and you can reimburse me when you pay."

Sapphire looks uncertain but decides not to argue. I love it when professionals recognize that I'm a professional too and don't argue with my professional...yeah. Her eyes are REALLY stunning.

I walk her to the nearest metro station and we descend to the lower level. Given how amazing she looks and how excellently she's dressed, and the fact that I'm in a combat harness with six pistols, it's pretty clear who and what we are. Maybe not that she's an escort, but that she's important and I'm a bodyguard. There are times I think I should go for a more subtle approach but it's amazing how much leeway and elbow room you get with six pistols on your person.

There's a same-day money launderer I know that's on the way that we'll hit up. I sure as hell ain't using an ATM. This guy is crooked as they ever are, but he knows not to screw me. He'll charge me, like, 1% interest, which is fine given the fact that I'm asking for a stack of cash on the spot in the middle of the night.

We load into a metro car and start our trek. The metro system in Sacramento isn't the best in the world, but it sure isn't the worst. The cars are a little rundown, sure, but they're not trashy. I've been to New York City and...yeah, no.

The light over me running down the center of the car's aisle flickers a bit as the train rumbles along. I'm sitting on the outside, keeping an eye up and down the car. There's a woman up ahead with her two kids. Going by the bags under her eyes, I'm guessing she's single. Behind us is a couple dressed nicely, I'm guessing date night. Passed them are some young guys, cloistered and talking. They don't look like a threat and seem harmless but I've got my hand near a gun just in case.

As the train settles into a long stretch between stops, I glance at Sapphire in the window's reflection. Her face is alight with her computer as she fields various tasks. I'm not sure what she's doing because I'm more mesmerized by her tattoo. The cartoon figure is glowing in the light of the computer screen, almost like it's fluorescent.

As I consider asking her if she has glowing ink in her tattoo, I realize she's looking at me in the window. Those beautiful, almond-shaped eyes blink luxuriously and she asks, "Yes?"

I consider making some excuse, but why lie? "Your tattoo," I say, gesturing at my collar where it would be on me. "I was just..."

She turns from my reflection and faces the person. She exudes such sensuality. I've been around professional women like this before but she's a step above anyone else I've met. She asks, "What about it?"

I'd like to be all clever and be all 'I couldn't help but notice that it's placement is atypical for a woman of your distinction'. Instead, I'm not much better than a middle school boy talking to his first crush. As such, I stammer out, "What's it covering up?"

Her mask of professionalism doesn't waver for a moment. She tilts her head to the right side, her rich lips shifting from one enigmatic smile to another, both more mesmerizing than the Mona Lisa's could ever hope to be. Given the way she swallows, I can tell I'm getting a truth few people are told. "It was a brand." Her voice is course, not to me but to the admission of the tattoo's purpose.

"A brand?" I gawk quietly. I glance around the metro car, nervous I spoke too loud even though I only whispered. Nobody within a few meters of us ensures I could have spoken clearly and still not been heard. "Like, a slavery brand?" I clarify. I'm not sure why. I know damn well that's what she means.

She entertains my tactless curiosity with a nod. "Human trafficking." I can't help but notice that this black woman avoids the term white slavery. Not sure why I take notice of that. "I got it when I was eleven."

If I cringe or react in any way, she doesn't show it. She just turns and faces down at her tablet, relighting the screen. I face forward in the car and let that horror wash over me.

Lou Ortega has a cybernetic right eye that's chrome, a left forearm that's brass-plate, and a stub where he used to have a left ear. He looks like a walking reminder of why crime doesn't pay. He's a shrimpy little weasel that's never done anything important in his life, but managed to screw up just enough to piss off people who like to remove body parts when you don't pay on time.

He comes out of the backroom carrying a thickly-padded white envelope, the silk colors of his unbuttoned overshirt lopsided on the world's thinnest neck. "Heer ya goah," he says, in the movie version of a gangster accent. "Now yer ain't gonna skip tahwn on me, are ya Rhest?"

I just grimace comically at the suggestion. "Pssh, are you kidding? And risk your ire?" I count the money in front of him because he's a loan shark and I'm not an idiot. To my almost-surprise, the money's all there. I take out my cell phone and snap a picture of it and send him a copy. "You get it?"

"Whatchya do-uhn?" he asks cluelessly as he opens the photo.

"I want you to confirm that the picture I just sent you is the money I'm taking," I tell him. "Because if I get back with your cash and you're all 'no no, I loaned you twice that', I want photo evidence of what I shoot you over." Lou looks pissed. Whether it's because I saw through his plan or I don't trust him, I don't know. I also don't care. "Thanks, man," I tell him.

I exit the video rental shop, a thick stack of bills in my hand. As I'm depositing the cash into a pocket of my combat harness, Sapphire reads off the neon sign, "DVDs, Laserdisc, and VHS?" She does an impressed double-take. "Betamax?"

"Yeah, well," I say as I secure the pocket just under the pistol I named Reason. "Using most streaming services means your choices are monitored. Every movie you watch goes into a database, collating your demographic information." I start walking, leading her towards the metro station. "Some people don't want the entertainment corporations knowing exactly what they watch, when they watch it." I gesture back at the store. "So, rentals're making a comeback."

Sapphire gives it a moment of thought as we walk and nods. "I never thought about it like that."

"Plus, they deal in cash, so it makes money laundering easier," I add. She just nods, that part making more sense to her. Our evening continues.

Our destination is the debatably-famous Western Overlook Hotel.

Arriving just before midnight, I get the impression this place was originally named as some poor joke about California falling into the ocean or something. When that didn't happen because people don't really get the nuances of geological phenomena like tectonic shifting, they didn't bother to change it. I don't know. It's a nice if nondescript hotel whose lobby has a bunch of paintings and other imagery that involves cliffs overlooking the ocean. What can I say? Sacramento can be weird.

Anyway, Sapphire and me head into the Sequoia Ballroom to find a large party in full-swing. Men and women of all persuasions and dressed in every stripe of fashion are boogying away to a live DJ. Stage lights are flashing all over the place and there are balloons along the corners of the room. A long refreshment table is set up, as is a cash bar. A banner over the stage is wishing somebody named 'Jeremiah Davies' a happy 100th Birthday.

So, escort assignments are tricky. I'm decked out in full combat regalia but I also need to stay as out of sight as somebody sporting six pistols can be. I need to stay within a breath of my client but I also need to give her space to do her job. It's a tricky balancing act that results in me staying by the wall, keeping Sapphire in the corner of my eye but not looking precisely at her. I have to look casual but be ready to move in an instant. It's as easy as it sounds.

Sapphire's client is an older gentleman, maybe in his fifties or something. She approaches him independent of me and they only talk for a moment before they get to dancing. Coincidentally, the DJ plays something appropriate for her wear. I'm not sure what the details of their deal are, though I know where it will end (his hotel room). I'm not sure how long they'll stay here at the party but I'm booked through 6am so I'm getting paid to dawn either way. Besides, they've got real-beef mini-sausages at the refreshments table.

As Sapphire and her client dance, transitioning from one song to the next, I get approached by somebody with the party-proper. I doubt it's Jeremiah Davies but it might be his son or grandson. Hell, the dude just turned 100? Might be his great-grandson. As rap music blasts and Sapphire twerks with her client, this dude comes over to me and says, "Hey, I didn't see your name on the guest list."

I pop another mini-sausage into my mouth and tell him directly, "Because I'm crashing." Why lie? I pop another mini-sausage into my mouth. Choosing to not lie clearly stuns him because his mouth just hangs open for a second as he tries to figure out what to say next. "I'm security for one of the party," I have to yell into his ear. It doesn't reassure him like I'd hoped.

"Security for who?" he yells back.

"That's confidential."

"I need to know so I can verify your story," he tells me.

"Too bad."

"I will call security," he threatens me loudly.

That's funny. "One, I am security," I tell him, holding up a finger with each point, "just for one person, not everyone. Two, this hotel has no security and the night manager isn't throwing me out. Three, I'm not disrupting anybody."

"You're disrupting me!" he snaps at me. Oh, somebody wants to get punched.

Whatever irritation I have stays on the inside as I affect a cool, almost bored demeanor on the outside. "I am not leaving," I tell him, "until my client instructs me." He starts to speak and I keep going. "And I am not violating my client's confidentiality."

He glares for just a second and then storms away. Given the way he makes a beeline for the ballroom door, I'm guessing he's going to the night manager. That's it, dude. Ask some minimum-wager to come and get into a fight with a street merc. If you can even get her to come out from behind the counter, I'll be impressed.

As he disappears out the door, I check and see Sapphire and her client are making their way off the dance floor. I grab one more mini-sausage from the refreshment table when an older woman in a pink dress saunters up to me. "Hey baby," she tells me, smelling of Jheri curl juice and baby powder. "How 'bout you take me for a dance?"

Grandma, I like our style. "Sorry, but I'm on the clock," I tell her. I take a wrinkled hand and kiss her a gnarled knuckle. "Next time." I give her a wink. She blushes but gives me a taunting look and then laughs. An Octogenarian just tried to pick me up. I'm feeling pretty good about myself.

Sapphire and her client depart unceremoniously. I stay out of sight so that the man thinks she's all alone with him. In reality, she's got a shadow with six pistols and two fists that will keep her safe. They head out of the ballroom and down a hall that's throbbing with the bass of the dance music. In the elevator foyer, they wait in muffled silence. Sapphire continues to laugh in the most seductive, sensual way imaginable at his every joke. The man might be older than her but he's not without some suave as well. I'm guessing he hired a professional for her skill, not to ensure he got lucky. I bet he could have made that happen regardless.

The elevator doors part and the two step inside. I make sure Sapphire notices me but her client does not. She looks me right in the eye but otherwise doesn't react. The instant the doors seal shut, I rush for the adjacent stairs. Throwing open the door, I sprint up the first flight. I peek out onto the floor and confirm the elevator didn't stop. I do that again and again and by the time I get to the sixth floor, I'm not winded by any stretch but I've got some breathing going on.

The man leads Sapphire down a long hall that's totally quiet. It feels noisy because our ears are ringing from the music, but I'm already adjusting. I hear the man's voice but not really what he says. It's deep and it sounds like expensive

leather feels. He escorts Sapphire to a hotel room about ten doors down and lets her inside.

I walk passed the door, very subtly placing a sonic sensor on the door itself. Connected to my internal audio systems, I'll be able to hear what's going on in the room. The size of a hole on a sheet of loose leaf paper, it's almost impossible to notice. I leave it and walk all the way to the other end of the hall, securing the floor. Fire exits and stairs at both ends and no sign of anyone lurking anywhere. I stay at the stairs opposite the elevators. They're a bit closer to the room Sapphire's in and I dial up my audio pickup. I can hear them talking, but again I can't tell what they're saying. I get ready for a long night, one where I have to hear the nasty sounds of the formation of the beast with two—

"No!" Sapphire says firmly.

I'm dialed up in a second. I yank out Reason and Respect, my two primary pistols, but I hold still. She didn't sound like she was protesting or refusing, but in disbelief. I listen closely. "You're not serious," she says again. I hear him speak but I don't know what he's saying. "Oh my god!" she exclaims. I hear steps and her going for the door.

I'm halfway to the room when I hear her get stopped. They're right in front of the door so I can't just kick it in. Besides, hotels this nice have surprisingly sturdy doors. Fortunately, it sounds like she's not in too much danger, just disgusted or repulsed. The guy says, "So what if I am?" He sounds creepy now. "I haven't seen you in years. And we're both adults. It's not like we're going to make some retarded baby." What the hell, dude?!

"Go to hell!" Sapphire tells him and the door is flung open. She takes one look into the hall, spots me, and makes a beeline right for me.

"Get back here!" the man yells, just before coming to a cold stop as I put Respect right to his forehead. Nothing says 'freeze' like staring down the barrel of a pistol used for hunting big game and small trucks. His hands go up and he freezes. I step into him, forcing him back a step just to make the point. "Wh-who are you?" he stammers, like I'm the one out of place.

"He's what happens if you push this matter, DAD," she accuses with dripping, hateful disgust.

Dad? DAD? What the hell am I in the middle of?!

Turns out the answer is a gunfight.

See while Sapphire and her – YUCK – father have been arguing, a couple of older unsavory-looking gents have come out of the stairs behind me. Nothing too odd about a pair of guys in the early granddad-neighborhood wearing long coats taking the stairs to the sixth floor, I guess. But the instant I notice not only them but two more guys of similarly unsociable disposition wearing the international uniform for criminals coming out by the elevator, I know exactly what's happening. They know too because as soon as they see me seeing them, coats get flipped back and I see the guns.

I kick 'dad' in the chest, not to do damage but to knock him back into his room. I grab Sapphire and throw us both backwards, slamming hard into the hotel room door opposite 'dad's' room. Sadly, the door doesn't give like I hoped it might (like I said, sturdy doors) but at least we're pressed up against the wall and our profiles are minimized.

I roll around so that my back is facing the goon squad. My combat harness is armored, I've got plates of armor on my gear, and I've got some low-level dermal plating in my skin. None of that's going to do much against a straight shot but they can make the difference between an ouch and passing out from the pain. Besides, with Sapphire momentarily protected (any bullet worth its weight will go right through a body), the next task is to make it harder for them to land a straight shot.

Reason and Respect come springing out like angelic wings made of violence. I fire twice at both pairs of skeezy-looking grandpa-types. If I score a hit, I don't notice and I don't take time to find out. I throw myself backwards across the hall, firing some more and slamming my back into the wall next to 'dad's' room. Sapphire only has time to look up before I run right back at the door I'd originally tried to knock down. This time, with a running start, I dropkick it right at the handle.

Remind me to buy stock in the corporation that makes these locks because the damn thing does not break. The handle still dangles there from the door frame. The rest of the door, however, does bow in, warp, then finally break. The simulated, reinforced wood cracks and splinters and slams against the wall of the empty hotel room. I shove Sapphire inside, then fire more shots at the two teams as they return fire. I slam the door shut behind me, wait a beat, then fire through the door with Reason. Respect will splinter the door with its power, or at the very least knock holes so large in it you could lob a grenade through. Reason, though, does nothing but create tiny little bullet holes in the door (and the wall beyond, and the wall on the other side of the building, and probably the wall of the building across the street).

We've got a second. I look at the empty hotel room, the lights off. Two queen beds, a desk, a video stand, and a recliner. I rush to the window and look outside. The Western Overlook Hotel has no neighbors closer than a full street and I'm looking out on a modest parking lot to boot. We ain't jumping that. Fortunately, it has nice wide ledges under the window.

I fire another shot through the door just in case and then kick the window. The glass cracks slightly, but on the sixth floor, I guess they sprung for the armored stuff. Now Respect gets to play. One shot and the entire pane of glass gets knocked out into the night like a sheet of paper blown in a tornado.

I check on Sapphire and the woman gets props. She pulled a drawer out from the desk and is readying to use it like a cudgel. Quick thinking, but I grab her arm and pull her to the window. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" she exclaims. I'm about to insist this is our best chance, but she kicks off her pumps (and loses, like, two inches in height) before saying, "Okay." I help her quickly out onto the ledge and

she shimmies out carefully. "Which way?" she asks and I gesture towards the front of the hotel. I part with another shot through the door, just to be sure.

I climb out and the wind is whipping hard. It's not a big, big deal but Sapphire's dress is kicking up badly. It may have looked tight down on the ground, but up here, the slightest crease or flexure is tugged by the coursing winds of a city still partially-addicted to gasoline.

Sapphire stays pressed up to the textured, rough exterior wall. She keeps her eyes closed as best she can and focuses on staying calm and moving. I'm perfectly fine with heights like this so I shimmy faster and actually step around her. I glance back and I don't see the goons.

The next window is dark but the following window is bright. Inside is an older gentleman with a huge tuft of white chest hair and a young woman that's probably as old as his granddaughter. He's got his phone out and is mid-call when he spots me through the window. I gesture for him to open the window and he shakes his head no. I hold up Respect demonstratively and tap on the glass. Sapphire appears next to me as well. He's suddenly a lot more accommodating. Whether that's due to Respect or Sapphire, I don't know or care.

I help Sapphire inside first, then hop in and shut the window. I grab the blinds and pull them closed. "What's going on?" the rich man demands. Given his powerful voice, I'm guessing he's a senator or a representative or something. Given the quake in his voice, I'm guessing he's not used to dealing with, you know, normal people.

"A VIP with a security situation," I tell him. We walk right out, back into the hall. I step out first, sweeping the hall quickly with Reason and Respect. I see no one. The goons have either left or they're in the room. Either way, we gotta move. "Come on," I say and Sapphire follows. She slips out behind me and then starts for the stairs at the front of the hotel. I head backwards, staying step-for-step with her as I stare the sights of my two death-dealers.

Sapphire pushes open the door onto the stairs, having to work for it thanks to the air pressure difference. She stumbles through, me backing up after. Once we're in the stairwell, I turn and face up, then down. I see no one and I hear nothing. "Come on," I tell her. I put away Reason and grab her hand. We start down the stairs as quickly as possible.

"I can keep up," she says. I don't answer but the reason I'm holding her hand isn't to pull her along but to make certain I know where she is without compromising my vision facing forward. She's my client and I can't risk taking my eyes off her, nor can I risk not keeping my attention all around us.

We come out into a hallway for the service staff, the walls divided at waist height between taupe and gray. A bunch of people in semi-tuxedos and similar fine clothing are all watching the door into the lobby. The instant they see us, they all back away. I don't bother engaging them and instead turn and head away from the lobby. Gunshots in my neighborhood don't usually warrant the cops. In somewhere as nice as the Western Overlook? Probably.

I kick open the door and leap out into the night. Nothing looks amiss but there are people all over the sidewalk. I guess when the shooting started, everybody evacuated? Is that what they're teaching kids in school now? I see the dude from the party that was giving me a hard time. He sees me and his face goes white in fear. I can't help but smile a little but I've got bigger problems than him.

Now that we're out on the street, I quickly survey the rooftops and see nothing. Alleys and corners and doorways. Nothing as well. I see no sign whatsoever of the four goons that sandwiched us up on the Sixth. I put away Respect, grab Sapphire's hand, and we start to walk briskly but calmly-looking into the night.

We keep walking down the street as quickly as we can until the lights of the Western Overlook have blended into the rest of the Sacramento's nighttime ambience. The shadows are longer now and the buildings shorter. Digital lights and neon glows are everywhere but there are longer gaps between the illumination of advertising. I check over Sapphire's shoulder and confirm we aren't being followed. I indulge in a brief sigh of relief. I think we're okay...for the moment. "You got any idea who those dudes were?" I ask her as I keep surveying every direction possible, all while trying to look calm. "I don't think they were after your..." She looks longways at me. I finish cautiously with "...your client."

She hugs her elbows close and keeps her eyes closed a long time. She walks on bare feet over the nighttime pavement, lost in a bout of post-shootout soul-searching. "I guess they were...they must have been there for me. I know them." She looks over her shoulder at me, the guarded a defensible look of a queen. "Knew them."

Something inside of me freezes as the implications of that chill me. What I thought was fear of the firefight was actually fear of the men behind those guns. Sapphire paces ahead and turns back to me and belies the first hint of vulnerability I've seen in this woman. This queen, this dark-skinned majesty who seems more controlled than most machines, gives way a genuine unsettled fear as she hunkers in on herself. "Jean-Luc and Charles. They were two men who worked for..." She stops talking and looks away. At first, I think it's because of the flashing 'Open Now' sign outside of a vap shop, but realize it's to keep from crying. "They were part of the syndicate that my mom sold me to."

Geez, her mom?!

Her feet stop moving and she plants in retrospective thought. Sadly, however much Sapphire might need to talk, the side of a less-than-major thoroughfare is not the place for it. A gentle hand on the small of her back, I guide her back into walking and look for a spot. Out on the street, it's hard to keep an eye on all the possible threats. And while I've been in more than my share of gunfights, the adrenaline rush never really goes away. I need a second to calm down myself. So, when I spot a coffee shop in the corner of a closed grocery store, we make a beeline straight for it.

The smell of overpriced dark roast in an empty coffee shop hits both of us hard. The dark grocery store beyond feels kind of ominous but the two baristas spending more time on their phones than making coffee helps calm us both. I sit

Sapphire down at the table and then go to the counter. "Yo, can I get..." The girl stops me by holding up a lower-end cybernetic finger as she taps on her cell phone. Really? It's 1am and you're going to prioritize your text over the one customer you've seen in an hour?

After a paragraph and a response, she looks over the phone. Doesn't even lower it; just looks over it. "Whatchyu want?" she finally asks me, aiming at me the most indifferent look I've ever seen. Her apathy could be weaponized. Seriously, this girl would have to find religion and convert to a whole new system of beliefs and personal commitment to others just to have one single damn to give. It's amazing. I have never seen apathy of this magnitude before. I think I stammer something dumb, then just slink away from the sheer enormity of the damn that girl doesn't give.

I go back over to Sapphire and sit down opposite her. The coffee shop is really long and narrow so from my vantage, I can watch the front with ease. There's only one window aside from the door and it's narrow, plus half-obscured by a book case hocking take-home coffee options. Sapphire's staring down at the cheap imitation wood table. She doesn't look upset per say but she's definitely not okay. As I consider what to say, those smoky eyes that redefine beautiful float up to me and my ability to speak is momentarily stolen.

"What a night," Sapphire says with a quiet smile that's tied down with sorrow. She looks at me and does give a very genuine but professional smile of apology. "I'm sorry about all this. I had no idea. I expected this to be, to be routine."

I just shrug. "It happens." That's not a line. This kind of thing happens all the time. That's part of why I'm never wanting for work.

Sapphire's eyes drift away like a cloud passing over the moon. "Yeah, my mother and father..." She looks...not bitter but something else. Disappointed but it's like a disappointment at something more fundamental than merely a person. Maybe she's disappointed in the world? I'm not sure. Given what I've learned tonight about her life, I couldn't blame her.

It happens fast. Sapphire glances up and then her eyes shift off me to the space behind me. Her warm, seductive smile drops and her eyes go wide with fear. The gunmen came through the back, through the dark and closed grocery store.

Rather than draw Reason and Respect and whirl around (which will take too long), I slide my hands under my armpits to where my backup pistols, Affinity and Alternative, hang ready. I don't draw the holdout guns but fire backwards, using the reflection in the narrow window in front of me to aim. I doubt I'll hit them but I'll get a lot closer than I would if I fire blind.

The shots surprise the goons because they panic big-time. They return fire but with how wild their shots go, they might as well have used harsh language. I leap up and, Affinity and Alternative drawn, I begin to pepper them with shots. Affinity tears through armor, flesh, and bone with little concern. Alternative is all stopping power so armor stops it but it knocks one guy off his feet so hard that he gets knocked out just by the force of him hitting the wall.

The one problem with holdout pistols is they don't have a lot of rounds. Affinity and Alternative click hungrily and two of the four guys are still standing. The dude on the left is bleeding badly but he's still got some fight in him. The guy directly in front of me is torn up through his clothes but the dermal armor means my shots just made him mad. He aims a giant pistol at me, one with the look of a box and I'm going to guess the punch of a civilian tank.

No time to draw Reason and Respect, I drop my backups and kick the table in front of me. It slams into the next table that knocks over the chairs, one of which catches him in the leg, causing him to miss his shot. Well, that and I ducked and sprinted at him. I tackle him right at the knees and feel the satisfying snap of ligaments as we both go down and I land on his legs. I get up and straddle him and begin to ground-n-pound. Hand-to-hand isn't the best way to deal with assailants but damn if it can't be satisfying.

The bloodied dude kicks me in the shoulder. Not sure why he did that when he's got a gun, but whatever. Maybe once he saw somebody throwing a punch, his mind went to hand-to-hand mode? Who knows? The kick doesn't feel good but it doesn't do much more than throwing off my punching rhythm. Blood is all over my armored fingerless gloves so I think it's safe to say my current foe is down.

Bruce Lee here draws back for another kick and I leap at him. There's something delightful about interrupting an attack. It just throws the other person for a loop because they thought they had the advantage but, because they were mid-attack, they realize how unstable they actually were. It's a teachable moment, really.

I go for a single-leg takedown but don't get it. Dude's bloody as hell but he's still got some strength in him and he resists. I don't fight him but instead slip around behind him. He thinks I'm going for a choke but I wrap my hands around his waist and hike back. I do a backbend, he goes over me, and I suplex him skull-first right on the floor. I don't know if he's dead quite yet, but I'm willing to put five bucks on it.

I crawl out from under either a corpse or somebody who is going to wake up with the world's worst headache. Coffee shop is all shot to hell, but Sapphire's okay and the coffee shop ain't paying me. I do check on the two girls behind the counter. They both look fine. They ducked when the shooting started but now that it's over, the girl on my right is consulting the corporate terms on how to deal with dead bodies while the other girl is updating social media about how much work sucked tonight. Hey, toughness comes in a lot of forms, I guess.

Sapphire looks up at me and just sort of exhales with a look like she's mad that I'm earning my paycheck but she's also super-grateful that I'm on her side. I offer her my hand and she accepts it, standing like a queen. I don't know how many of these goons there are. It's just been four guys thus far, but those may be only the ones we've seen. Four guys for one woman seems like underestimating the target, especially one with experience with this group, but then human traffickers have never been known for their intelligence. If anything, their only common trait is frugality and sending four guys for one woman already sounds more generous than most are willing to commit, resource-wise. I may be

overthinking this, but regardless, while I help her stand with one hand, my other hand stays by my pistol.

There's a silence that follows in the wake of a fight and it's a silence we inhabit now. Not a hard soundlessness, though. A high-definition world of perception, where everything is magnified and intensified. There's a clarity wherein you are aware of every precious noise as well as the gaps in the air between them, like sounds are perfumes and you're mindful not only of the space they take up but also the free space between them.

That precious silence gets ruptured by the opening of the front door of the coffee shop. In comes Sapphire's client, her apparent father. He freezes when he sees us though, with that unmistakable look of surprise that we're the ones still alive. "Thank god you're—" he starts to lie when Respect gets right in his face.

"Uh-huh," I tell him. Respect's barrel backs him right into the wall.

"Y'all, no more shootin'," calls one of the baristas.

I inform her, "You got as much say in the matter as you got change in that tip jar, lady," as I burn my hate into the man's eyes.

Sapphire ignores all this. "Why'd you come here?" she demands of him, her eyes narrowed with well-controlled rage. My finger runs along the edge of the gun. If she gives the word, the body count will be five, no matter what the barista says.

"I-I heard the shooting," he stammers, his mouth never fully closing when he speaks. His dark skin is beginning to bead with tiny slivers of sweat, turned silver in the nighttime light.

"Not this place," Sapphire says, her eyes wide and her head shaking in disbelief of his lie. She steps in front of me to confront her dad. Damn it, why do people always step in front of the person with the gun? She demands, "Why'd you come looking at all?"

I can tell he's lying the instant he opens his mouth. "I wanted to make sure you were—"

Sapphire slaps him.

It's not a hard slap, but the sound of emotional contact echoes like no gunshot ever will.

Her eyes are shaking, I can see that much. There's the subtlest tremble to her chin but otherwise, her only emotion is intensity as she just stares. She demands the truth from him. "Why?" He's scared and it's not my gun that's scaring him. Sapphire slaps him again. She comes back across the other side with the same hand, a strike she was on the receiving end for more of her life than I want to imagine. "Why?" she asks again. Her entire chin is quaking. Then she breaks. "WHY?!" It's a feral shout from her whole body.

He's shaking before her ferocity. He was so much taller than her at the start of the evening, so dignified, like a deacon, a preacher. Now he's practically cowering, slinking down the wall like the worm he is. "I-I never got my money," he blubbers, the truth escaping his body in a desperate bid to save his life. "Your

momma took you, and then she ran. She owed me. She owes me." Sapphire's stunned beyond comprehension.

He slides up the wall, regaining some of his presence but none of his dignity. "When I saw you at the club," he tells her. "When I saw you, I knew who you were immediately. I saw my chance to, to get what your momma owed me. To get what I was owed, all these years. Get what I was owed." Good god, he talks like he's genuinely the victim here.

"Your half," Sapphire reasons in horror. "You wanted your half of the money my mother got for selling me into slavery."

"I was just making things right between her and me," he jibbers at Sapphire, like that's completely reasonable, like that totally makes sense. I swear, if Sapphire wasn't within splatter range, I'd shoot him right now.

Sapphire spares not a single word more on him. He isn't worth it. She turns her back to him. A woman of so much strength, she looks so despondent now. She's still for a second, like a photograph of injury. After a second of motionless shock, she glances to the side, then looks at me. Those eyes stare into mine like she wants some kind of explanation, some kind of reason, to make sense of the world right now. She can see I have none to offer her.

I have never felt like I failed a client so much like I do right now.

She puts her hand on Respect and lowers my arm. "Let's go." She turns and looks at the man who was responsible for her birth. She looks at him with not disdain or hate, but pity. "Here's your half," she tells him. Gifting him with his very life, she exits.

I make sure the door shuts behind her and then I look at him. I look at him. I see him and he damn-well knows under whose scrutiny he now finds himself. I don't speak, I don't threaten, I don't do anything but look. And by god, he knows if she ever sees him again, I will kill him. If he ever so much as walks on the same side of the street as her, I will kill him. In my gaze, he can see no greater truth, trust my intentions with as much certainty as the sun rising in the morning.

I turn my back on him and walk out. I follow behind Sapphire, leaving him to die in whatever way he sees fit.

The ride on the metro is quiet and uncomfortable. Sapphire only stares forward, looking at nothing in the distance by looking back on her life. She puts her faith in me to guide her and, as her employee, I do so. I lead her through the city that, at this time of night, is still bustling and alive. Stores and stalls are still open. Musicians still play on street corners and in the metro tubes. Panhandlers and junkies. Corporate types and wannabes. Their lives go on, as they always have and perhaps always will. Meanwhile, Sapphire's world is broken in a way she didn't think possible and in a way I can't begin to imagine, and in a way neither of us understand.

We arrive at her stop. She lives across the street from a metro stop, in a corporate-run apartment building so large, it borders on a bio-dome. I'm not sure

how tall it is but it's got separate elevators for different groups of floors so it's well over sixty, though over a hundred floors wouldn't surprise me. It's shaped like a three-bladed fan with shops and fast food stalls on the lobby level and then apartments and whatnot higher up.

I lead her to her floor, 43rd, and to her door. She knocks and confirms her roommate isn't home. She uses a keycard to access her lock, then uses an old-fashioned key to open it. Once the door pops open, she looks at me. She exhales and says, "Thank you." It's honestly kind of strange her to hear her speak after so much silence.

So much of her façade has fallen and she's trusting me with her exhausted self. Somehow, it's even more beautiful than that queenly version I saw most of the night, up to the Western Overlook. She drapes her hand on my cheek in a tender stroke. "Would you like to come inside?" she offers with luxurious words. "Let me make you feel beautiful." My god, that might be sexiest thing a woman's ever said to me. I take her hand from my cheek and kiss her fingers. "No," she concludes with a bit of a wry, intelligent smile.

"No," I confirm for her. "But thank you."

"Is it because I'm your client?" she asks.

"Mostly," I tell her. Damn professional standards. "If you want to meet for dinner, or..." I just look at her open door and the inviting darkness beyond. Rarely have I seen anything so enticing. Just a step ahead. She smiles delightfully. "Tomorrow, then maybe. But not tonight." She just nods, recognizing the wisdom and agreeing with me. She takes my hand and kisses it just as I kissed hers.

"Maybe I'll call," she says with those eyes of pure beauty. I just smile, promising I want her to but assuring her I won't take it personally if she doesn't. She turns into the door and disappears into the darkness, not looking back at me as she shuts the door.

She doesn't call.

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