

IV

Lost Together

“Son of a rat-fiddling . . . goat-sucking . . . pig-fucking whore!”

“Dior’s shout echoed on the ice, teeth bared in a frustrated snarl.

“You realize you’re only insulting my mama when you call me that?” I called. “It’s not actually an insult to me at all?”

“Eat shit, you cack-gargling twatgoblin.”

“See, that’s the spirit,” I smiled. “Now pick it up.”

“Dior spat into the snow. ‘I’m no good at this, Gabriel!’

“You’re shite. But how do you suppose one gets good?”

“We were stood on the frozen surface of the Mère River, mist hanging thick in the morning gloom. Frost billowed from Dior’s lips as she cursed again, dragging the sweaty tumble of hair from her eyes. But stubborn as a wagonload of drunken mules, she sighed, reached down to the ice, and picked up her training sword.

“Were you this terrible when you started out?”

“Doesn’t matter.” I took a swig of vodka, tucked my flask inside my greatcoat.

“Measure yourself not by where others are, but where you used to be.”

“I raised my sword, eyes on hers.

“Once more with feeling.”

“We’d been trekking downriver nine days, San Michon lost in the deepening snows behind us. We’d set out the morning Celene and I clashed, accompanied by three tundra

ponies ‘borrowed’ from the monastery stables. They were a sturdy trio; that hardly Talhost breed known as sosyas, and they’d been raised to be unafraid of the Dead—good news, considering the strange new company we were keeping. But my sister was off scouting now, and the beasts stood easy in the shelter of twisted trees on the riverbank, watching as Dior and I began trying to dash each other’s brains out again.

“We used wooden swords, filched from the Armory along with a stash of silvershot, chymicals, sanctus, and a princely sum of monastery vodka to boot. I hadn’t been able to find the saber Dior had taken from Danton’s corpse, so I’d armed her with my old silversteel dagger and a new longblade from Argyle’s armory. She couldn’t swing a sword to save her life yet, but I could recall the sight of the Beast of Vellene as he burst into flames from the mere touch of her blood. And I knew this girl was a weapon leeches would learn to fear.

“‘Northwind,’ I commanded.

“Dior lifted her training blade and took up the offensive stance I’d demonstrated. Her breath was coming quick, cheeks flushed with exertion.

“‘Blood Voss,’ I demanded. ‘What are they?’

“‘The Ironhearts. Brood of Fabién.’

“‘Their creed?’

“‘All Shall Kneel.’

“She came at me quick as silvershot, running the pattern I’d shown her; belly, throat, chest, repeat. I parried each blow, our swords cracking against each other as we danced.

“‘Very good,’ I said, backing away across the ice. ‘What are their gifts?’

“‘They shrug off hurts that’d end other coldbloods. Silver. Fire. And the older ones can read people’s mi—’

“I dodged a clumsy thrust, poked her ribs as she stumbled past.

““You’re giving your game away with your eyes. Don’t look where you’re set to hit. Feel your way. Now, what’s the proper term for older vampires?”

“She turned on me, breath hissing. ‘Ancien.’

““Good. Southwind stance.’ Dior shifted to the defensive at my command, turning a blow that I threw at her face. ‘Blood Ilon next. Name and creed.’

““The Whispers,’ Dior said, backing off. ‘Sharper Than Blades.’

““Their gifts?”

“Dior winced as I struck, barely fending off my assault, panting for breath. ‘They play with emotion. Twist you madder or happier, tumble your passions all around. Make you act in ways you wouldn’t, say things you shouldn’t, feel things that aren’t real.’

“The Push,’ I nodded. ‘Not quite as flashy as breaking swords on your skin or punching down walls. But when you can’t trust your own heart, you can’t trust anything.’

“We fell into another flurry, Dior gasping as she parried my next few strikes. Her hair was damp with sweat, her breath coming hard and chill.

““Excellent,’ I nodded. ‘Now, Blood Dyvok. Name their creed.’

““Deeds Not Words.’

““Who are they? What can they do?’

““The Untamed. Their ancien are so strong they can crush steel in their fists, smash down castle walls with their bare hands. Even the young ones are—’

“I fainted low, then tapped her shoulder. ‘What do we call newborn vampires?’

““Fledglings,’ she wheezed.

“I struck at her chest and head. ‘And the gifts of ancien Dyvok?’

““They command people. Bend a person’s will with the power of their voice.’

““Like the Ilon?’

“‘No.’ She shook her head, chest now heaving like a bellows. ‘The Ilon are subtler. They whisper, and people agree. Dyvok roar, and people obey.’

“‘They call it the Whip. Subtle as a sledgehammer. But just as effective.’

“I renewed my attack, quicker than before; chest, belly, throat, belly. Dior turned each blow aside, and I caught myself smiling when she read my feint. But as she danced away, she slipped on a treacherous stretch of ice, and I smacked her wrist hard enough to leave a bruise. Dropping her sword, she bent double and spun on the spot.

“‘Goddamn it!’

“‘Fighting is dancing. Always mind your footing, Lachance.’

“‘That fucking hurt, Gabriel!’

“‘If this blade were steel, you’d have no fucking hand. You think that’d tickle?’

“‘I tried to move!’

“‘Trying isn’t doing.’

“‘Right, but there’s no need to be a prick about it!’

“‘You’re the one who asked me to teach you this,’ I growled. ‘A blade and half a clue are twice as dangerous as no blade or clue at all. So if you insist on swinging one, there’s every reason under heaven to be a prick about teaching you to do it proper. This world won’t give you what you want just because you asked nicely, girl. Not respect. Not love. Not peace. You get what you earn. You eat what you kill.’

“I took another burning swig of vodka, pointed to her fallen blade.

“‘So kill, damn you.’

“She scowled. She swore. She spat a few more colorful insults about my mama, and the fact that I forgave them all should give you some indication of how fond I was growing of this girl. Because for all her griping, Dior never relented. She earned a few more bruises, I

drilled her until she was drenched with sweat. But she never stopped working until I told her enough. And seeing the steel in her eyes, I understood why.

“The entire Company of the Grail had given their lives to protect this girl—old Père Rafa, Bellamy Bouchette, Saoirse á Dúnnsair and her lioness, Phoebe. Aaron de Coste and Baptiste Sa-Ismael had been willing to risk the whole city of Aveléne to protect her. I’d drenched San Michon Cathedral red defending her.

“She wants to be able to defend herself.

“‘Alright,’ I grunted. ‘Breakfast will be ready.’

“Dior lowered her blade, wheezing. Too exhausted to even backchat me, she staggered toward our cookfire on the banks, crashing face-first onto her furs. I followed, stowing our blades on our spare pony—a silver roan I’d named Nugget. My own pony, a big dun I called Bear, stood beside him, snuffling in his feed bag.

“‘Thought of what to call her yet?’ I asked, stirring the cookpot.

“Dior’s voice was muffled by her furs. ‘Mnnff?’

“I nodded to a shaggy chestnut mare, sheltering in the shadow of a fungus-riddled oak. ‘She needs a better name than Pony.’

“‘Gabriel, the last horse I named hurled herself off a cliff a few days later.’

“‘And your theory is that happened because you gave her a name?’

“‘I’m just saying I ended up sleeping inside her,’ the girl said, still looking queasy about it. ‘So you’ll pardon me if I’m not in a hurry to name another.’

“I glanced at Dior’s beast, lips pursed. ‘What about Blanket?’

“‘Oh, God, STOP IT!’ she wailed, burying her face and kicking her heels.

“I chuckled, ladling out bowlfuls of rabbit-and-mushroom soup. I was no cookmaster, but the fare was hot and rich, and better than most we’d enjoyed on this road. Settling

beneath a frozen elm with a steaming bowl in my lap, I leafed through one of the tomes I'd 'borrowed' from the San Michon library while I ate.

“‘What are you reading for?’

“I blinked, glancing up from the illuminated pages. Dior was sitting cross-legged, slurping her soup and watching me across the flames.

“‘I don’t think I’ve ever been asked that question,’ I realized. ‘What I’m reading, certainly. Never what I’m reading for. You don’t like books?’

“She shrugged, shoveling in another mouthful. ‘Never saw much use for them.’

“‘Not much . . .’ I sputtered, outraged on behalf of every scribe, librarian, and bookshop owner in the imperium. ‘They’ve a thousand fucking uses, girl!’

“‘Name one. Aside from reading,’ she added as I opened my mouth to quip.

“‘Alright.’ I started counting off on my fingers. ‘You can . . . light them on fire. Throw them at people. Light them on fire, then throw them at people, particularly if those people are the sort of bucktoothed shitwits who don’t like books.’ Dior rolled her eyes as I pulled the tome up in front of my face. ‘They can serve as a brilliant disguise.’ I balanced the book on my head. ‘Fashionable headwear.’ I slipped it under my backside. ‘Portable furniture.’ I tore off a corner and pushed it in my mouth, chewing loudly. ‘Good source of roughage.’

“‘Fine, fine,’ she sighed. ‘They’ve their uses.’

“‘Damn right they do. The right book is worth a hundred blades.’

“‘All I’m saying is a book won’t cut your next purse or steal your next supper.’

“‘But they might teach you a better way to do both.’ My voice turned serious, then, all jest vanishing. ‘A life without books is a life not lived, Dior. There’s a magik like no other to be found in them. To open a book is to open a door—to another place, another time, another mind. And usually, mademoiselle, it’s a mind far sharper than your own.’

“Dior spoke around another ambitious mouthful, tapping her temple with her spoon.
‘Sharp as three swords, me.’

“‘Wooden ones, maybe.’

“She scoffed at that, kicking a toeful of snow in my general direction as I returned to my reading. Still smiling, we finished our breakfast in companionable silence, Dior cleaning the gear and packing it in our saddlebags while I saw to the horses.

“‘Put your ghostbreath on,’ I reminded her. ‘You’ll have sweated it off training.’

“‘Do I have to? It’s disgusting.’

“‘So are corpses. Which is exactly what you’ll be if you don’t put it on.’

“Dior groaned, but reached for the chymical concoction I’d brewed. It was a small bottle marked with a wailing spirit, pale liquid inside. It didn’t smell a bouquet, sure and true, but the hunters of San Michon used ghostbreath to mask their scent from the Dead, and as long as I’d traveled with her, the Dead had seemed drawn to Dior like flies to honey.

“‘That will not work,’ came a whisper.

“Dior startled, but I kept myself steady, brow raised as I glanced behind us. My sister had returned from scouting, it seemed, watching us now from a copse of dead trees. Long dark hair framed her porcelain mask, that bloody handprint over her mouth.

“‘We can sssmell her miles away if the wind is right,’ Celene said.

“‘You’re a highblood,’ I replied. ‘And a sanguimancer. Who knows whether simple wretched will be able to smell her as well as you.’

“‘They will. They do.’

“‘We’ll see.’

“Celene shook her head, Dior watching her through the falling snow.

“‘. . . What do I smell like?’ the girl finally asked.

“My sister fixed Dior with her dead stare, cold wind whispering between them.

“‘Heaven,’ she replied.

“Dior lowered her eyes, throwing a nervous glance at me. It had been the girl’s idea for us to travel this road together, and she’d spoken truth pointing out we’d no better prospects than to seek this mysterious Master Jènoah. But it seemed none of us were too comfortable with the arrangement.

“My sister had been journeying with us nine days, through truly, she kept our company only half that time; the rest spent scouting for the nameless danger she insisted was coming. Celene moved like a knife, swift and cold, keeping distance even when we walked together. She told us she’d no wish to spook the horses, but honestly, I think she was as uncomfortable in my company as I in hers. My sister was a vampire. I was a man who’d spent his life killing vampires. And we were all still coming to grips with those truths.

“But beyond the strangeness of her presence, the inexplicable power she wielded despite her age, another unease had been gnawing me for days now.

“I’d never seen her feed.

“Depending on her age, a vampire can go days, perhaps a week without blood before her thirst becomes unbearable. But I’d not seen Celene drink a drop—not once in all the time we’d traveled together. And while I supposed my baby sister might’ve been hunting in her long treks from our side, I was acutely aware of how little I truly knew of her.

“‘How much farther?’ Dior asked.

“Celene glanced down the curve of the Mère; the grey ice, the black trees encrusted with frozen blooms of shadespine and beggarbelly fungus. To the southeast, the shadow of grim and frozen Nightstone peaks could be seen rising above the deadwood.

“‘Perhaps a fortnight, moving sssswift.’

“‘It’s getting bloody cold out here,’ Dior said, blowing into her hands.

“‘It’ll be worse in the mountains,’ I warned. ‘The winds up there can freeze the very blood in your veins. We might consider sheltering somewhere warm awhile. Aveléne’s not far from here.’

“‘No,’ my sister snapped. ‘Aveléne takes us from our path. Every day the sssun fails to shine, more lives are squandered. More soulsss lost. We are heading to the Nightstone.’

“A scowl darkened my brow. ‘We owe Aaron de Coste and Baptiste Sa-Ismael a debt, Celene. Without their help, Dior would be in Danton’s clutches right now.’

“‘All the more reason not to darken their door,’ Celene replied. ‘The Beast of Vellene is dead, but Danton was not Fabién’s only child. If the Forever King had not already set more dogsss on Dior’s tail, he will be unleashing them now. You cannot protect her from her destiny, Gabriel. She mussst be prepared. She mussst face what—’

“‘I am fucking sick,’ Dior sighed, ‘of you two talking about me like I’m not here.’

“‘You mussst face what you are,’ Celene said, not skipping a beat. ‘What you mussst do to end the death of days. Those secretsss lie in Master Jènoah’s lair, not some river hovel. Have faith in yourself, chérie. In the path you have chosen. Aveléne is a fool’ssss errand.’

“I scoffed. ‘And visiting someone who refers to his home as a lair sounds a perfectly fucking sensible course of action.’

“‘This is a dangerous road,’ Celene nodded, still watching Dior. ‘We do not deny it. And there are other elderssss of the Faith we might seek. But they are far flung, or deep in the territory of our enemies. We cannot promise the journey to Master Jènoah will be without peril, Dior. But we can promise he will show you truth at the end of it.’

“Dior looked between us, clearly torn. We were taking an awful risk trusting Celene, and a warm hearth and hot meal in Aveléne was a tempting prospect. But this girl carried

the fate of the world on her shoulders now, and despite my reassurances, I knew some part of her still felt the weight of that red dawn in San Michon. Questioning if I'd been right to save her. Guilty that she lived while so many others suffered beneath our blackened sun.

“‘Celene’s right, Gabe,’ she finally sighed. ‘I have to learn how to end all this.’

“I pursed my lips, nodded slow.

“‘Lost together, then.’

“Our strange trio set off, Dior and I plodding along on horseback while Celene skulked in the distance. We left the river, cutting into a long stretch of deadwood, crusted with glittering fungal snarls. Riding into danger as we were, I determined to do everything I could to prepare Dior, and as we traveled, I shared wisdom from a lifetime fighting the dark—mostly talk about coldbloods, though I dispelled some mistruths about faekin and duskdancers just to break the monotony. Our shoulders were hunched, the gale howling through the trees, our tricorns filling slowly with snow. Dior was puffing on those cigarelles like they were paying her for the privilege, and I was drinking steadily, a constant scowl at my brow. I knew Celene was right—despite my fears, I couldn’t keep this girl sheltered forever. And it was a relief to think that there might yet be a way to end daysdeath.

“But what price was I actually prepared to pay for it?

“I looked about for my sister, but again, she’d disappeared among the snows. Taking another swig, I pondered the question of where she’d been all these years. I wondered about this Jènoah we were headed for, how Celene had fallen in with the Faithless after she died. And in quietest moments, I wondered if she knew something of my own father; the vampire who’d seeded our mother, and started our famille down this road to hell.

“‘Gabe.’

“Dior’s voice dragged me from my musings. She was sat tall atop Pony now, cigarelle dangling from her lips as she pointed south.

“‘Gabe, look!’

“Peering through the tangled woods, I spied a dark figure in the distance, stumbling in our direction. He was a tall Ossian fellow, his skin ghost-pale, square jaw dusted with blood and stubble. Sandy-blond hair was brushed into a whip of short spikes and shaved in an undercut, and he wore a dark greatcoat, its hem rippling behind him as he hobbled onward. He was clearly wounded; right arm hanging limp and a crimson trail spattered on the snow in his wake. Pausing to draw one of five wheellock pistols strapped across his chest, he fired behind him with his good hand. And squinting through the falling snow, I spied his targets.

“A pack, loping on all fours through the icy scrub, dashing swift among the trees.

“Dead-eyed, half-rotten, all hunger.

“‘Vampires,’ Dior whispered.”

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