



GAUNTLET

Jacks are Wild

Side Story

Written by Ellery Prime
Illustration by Tacto
Edited by Lianne Sentar

Please note

This story contains graphic adult themes and content.

Slight spoilers for the novel.

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Preview

This night, he had hinted, would be special. Clio wondered where he would take her after her work was done. Her very own clothes hung on the rack in the washroom, and she was puzzled--because she was usually given an outfit that matched her evening's duties. She dressed in silence.

Black Jack was waiting in her room.

"Hello, Claudia," he said with an impish grin as he made himself at home on her divan, looking ridiculously out of place in the midst of the plush pillows.

"Stop calling me that." She'd confessed days ago to her real name, and he still persisted in teasing her. She shoved his feet off the cushions. "What are you doing here so early?"

A small envelope appeared between his thumb and forefinger, her name written in fancy script on the paper--the same as every night before. She snatched the envelope from him with a small frown and opened it. She read the business card aloud.

"One-Eyed Jacks' Messenger Services. Messrs. Jack & Jack, Proprietors."

Black Jack grinned broadly.

"You?" Clio threw him a skeptical look. "I'm working for you tonight?"

"That's what it says, doesn't it?" Jack popped off the low couch. "Let's get going."

He picked up a small duffel bag and slung it over his shoulder. She followed him out into the hallway and down the narrow stairwell. Jack looked larger than life and too modern for the dim rooms decorated in eclectic vintage furnishings.

As always, she felt a weight temporarily slip off her shoulders when she stepped out into the night air with her hand laced with Jack's.

They walked down the narrow street, where the vendors were setting out their wares, and stopped to buy sugary steamed buns from a stall at the corner of a narrow alley. They ate them quickly, burning their fingers and tongues on the delicious pastries. Clio licked the sugar off her fingers while Jack pulled her down the alley.

The shops here didn't have any signs out front, and there were fewer people, but Clio and Jack went further down until the alley opened onto another small street. A red light glowed in the overhang of one doorway, and Jack rapped the dark brass knocker before pushing right in.

Clio followed, her stomach tightening as they passed by rooms filled with people lounging indolently. It was obvious what sort of establishment this was. Silk robes exposed long, smooth limbs, and both the girls and the boys stared at them with dark, liquid gazes that made Clio wonder if they'd been drugged.

"Jack," she whispered, her fingers squeezing tighter around his. "What are we doing here?"

The nasty suspicion that *this* was where she would be expected to work tonight made the fine hairs of her body rise up all over her skin.

"Just passing through. No worries." Jack winked at her over his shoulder.

A wide staircase curved up to a landing where she could see a door to an opulent bedroom room swinging shut. A faint giggle drifted down.

True to his word, Jack bypassed that and led her deeper into the building, then down. The basement walls were lined with brick, but a little door tucked behind wine shelves opened into a dark tunnel. Clio balked.

"What is this? Where are we going?"

"I told you. We're delivering a message."

"But--"

"Put this on." Jack dropped the duffel bag at her feet and grinned. "Required uniform."

The all-black pants and shirt she pulled out made her raise her eyebrows, but it was the black face mask--with built-in night goggles--that made her look at Jack like he was crazy. Not that that was in question. An uneasy feeling curled in her stomach.

"What *is* this thing?" Clio asked, holding up the mask as if she were afraid it might bite.

"Let's just say we need to keep a low profile," Jack said with a hurry-up gesture.

Clio grumbled, but she took off her sandals and slipped the pants on beneath her dress. "You call this low profile?" she muttered. "Turn around."

Jack obeyed the order while she slipped the straps off her dress and tugged the shirt over her head. Her white dress wriggled down over her hips, and she stepped out of it, rolled it up tightly, and stuck it in the duffle bag.

Black socks and boots completed the outfit. When Jack was allowed to turn around, he gave her a grin of approval. "Looking good, Clio. Put on the mask."

Clio did, feeling a bit claustrophobic with the full mask covering her head--but when Jack turned on the goggles, she had to admit it was kind of cool. She didn't resist much when he pulled her into the dark tunnel and shut the door behind them.

The tunnel twisted and turned and branched off from time to time, but Jack seemed to know where he was going, and it wasn't long before they came to another door that opened to another stairwell.

"Stay close and be quiet," Jack whispered. "If you see anyone, just stick with me and keep walking. I'll do the talking."

Clio nodded. To be honest, she was excited. The somnolent haze that had fallen over her during her time at the Night Market had cleared. Her senses felt sharp, awake, and Clio grinned beneath the mask.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" she whispered after several moments. Clio was hopelessly turned around and prayed Jack could remember his way back.

"Right here." Jack stopped in front of a dead end and flourished a hand at the stained, plain wall.

"If this is supposed to be a joke, it's not funny," Clio said peevishly. "I--"

Her mouth snapped shut when the wall slid open and Jack pulled her through. She craned her head to watch the doorway disappear again, leaving the wall to stand as seamless as before.

"Cool." Her voice sounded hollow in the confines of the mask. "What now?"

"Now." Jack cocked his head, and even though she couldn't see his face, she knew he was grinning. "We prowl."

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