

~~Jack~~

He looked at his phone, and sighed. “Avery says meet her at Eric’s place.”

“Eric? Perhaps she is making progress in recruiting the man.” Antoinette looked up over her shoulder at him, combing her wet hair with her fingers over her chest and down between her breasts.

“Heh, maybe. She’s just as rude as Jessy, and he seems to like Jessy.” Shrugging, he eased the phone onto a towel outside the hot tub, and turned his attention back to the woman lying on him, back against his chest. He was sitting in the tub, hot water up to his sternum. The Prince was letting the buoyancy of the water let her half lie, half sit on him, her head resting under his chin against his chest.

He was in swimming trunks. She was in a g-string, and nothing but. There was no way that could be comfortable, but she wore it of her own volition. Hell, he’d said don’t wear it if it was uncomfortable, but she just laughed at him, and took him to the hot tub, topless. At a certain point, his brain shut off, and simply followed the boobs.

Her boobs floated. He stared at them over her head, and slid his hands underneath her arms, so he could cup her breasts. So soft, and normally so heavy, but the way they fought to rise to the surface in the water made them feel so much different. He raised one out of the water, groaned at how it became heavy, spilling over his palm and fingers and hiding the entirety of his hand, before he lowered it, and the mountainous volume floated out of his palm; until he started caressing it. As expected, it earned only a chuckle from her, and she continued to comb her hair where she’d pulled a bundle of it down between her breasts.

“I remember, when we first started talking to each other,” he said, “you mentioned your eye color and hair color may have been because of your heritage?”

“Oui. I am one of the oldest in our order, and there is evidence to suggest a potential... link, I suppose, to our order’s origins. Though, I believe, I probably inflicted these changes upon myself.”

“What?”

“I am Daeva, and it is not uncommon for our kind to obsess over beauty, sexuality, or arts of any kind. I would not be surprised if I experimented on my own body in some quest for greater beauty.”

He frowned at the thought; it didn’t sit well with him. He was against body modification of the deceptive nature. Piercings, tattoos, those were all awesome. Getting fit and healthy to look better naked, more awesome. But experiments to give herself her goddess proportions?

“I... that’s the first time you told me you suspected that.”

“A curse of my age to forget my younger years. A curse of my younger years, to perform such an act.” She sighed, and let her head roll back to rest beside his chin, so she could look up at him. “Do you think less of me?”

“No, of course not. Hell, reminds me that you’re human, too.”

“Was human.”

“You know what I mean.” He kissed the side of her head, and started to trace circles around her nipples. There was something cozy about being allowed to play with her breasts while they talked about things, non-sexual things. The casual way he got to play with them, and squeeze them, caress and massage them, and lift them, even jiggle them, while talking about other things, tickled something in his brain. It was warm, and inviting, that level of comfort. Intimacy made manifest, maybe?

“I am glad it does not bother you. I have learned to accept my unusual body, and use it to my advantage.”

“And, I have to be honest. I really, really love the body.”

The Prince chuckled, before she leaned up to kiss under his jaw, and resumed combing her hair as she looked back to where the rest of her was a blur under the water. “I had wondered if you were only attracted to curvy women, but Ashley and Julee lack such features, and you seem quite attracted to them.”

“So are you.”

“Vraiment.” Her hands found his wrists, and while she kept one where it was, cupping her breast with a finger caressing her nipple, she guided the other one down her flat stomach, underneath her g-string, across her smooth mons, and onto her slit. With a warm chuckle, she blushed life, and Jack groaned as he felt the warmth fill her body. “Any word from Julias?”

He winced. Yeap, she was going to do this to him, make him finger her, play with her, while having a casual discussion about work. Torture, lovely torture.

“Nothing yet, except to tell me Jacob’s hasn’t talked to him yet,” he said. Her nipple responded quickly, swelling against his touch. Maybe it was the hot water, but all it took was a gentle touch, a graze of the underside of his finger along Antoinette’s clitoris, to make her sigh again, and lean her head back onto his chest.

“And what of that rascal Jessy? My thralls have learned the woman has been enjoying Eric’s company.”

“Y-Yeah, she’s... really roping him in. And I’m thinking she’s getting him to transform, full on werewolf mode, when they have sex.” If it were anybody else, he might hesitate to describe their sex life. But with Jessy, she probably couldn’t care less.

He trapped the Prince’s clitoris between index and middle finger, and began to massage it more directly. Consistent, gentle pressure, a soft rhythm of around, and around, and around.

Antoinette had other plans. She guided his hand a little further down, and used her fingers to push in on his. Two of his fingers slid into her clenching muscles, and Jack groaned, while the busty goddess leaned her head up to kiss his jaw again, as he started fingering her. Curling fingers in a slow fucking rhythm, hitting her g-spot again and again, earned a quiet moan from her. She kept her hand there, under her tiny, high-hip g-string, and caressed her clitoris under his hand. Her other hand went to her free breast, and caressed her nipple, plucking and twisting it in gentle, slow rhythms, like their fingers were doing to her pussy.

She was masturbating, while he fingered her. God damn.

“I hope she does not find herself terribly wounded, for such a feat of sexual curiosity,” she said. “

“I warned her it’d be dangerous.”

“I am sure everyone who knows has. But danger is a powerful spice, and some people, Kindred included, are addicted to its thrills. Imagine it, my love. A beast, a giant creature, still of form near enough to human for a viewer to appreciate its towering physique, and yet monstrous enough to elicit fear. Such a beast pins you to the bed, or floor, and glares at you with both animal aggression, but also inhuman, overpowering desire.” The woman on his body shivered, and Jack groaned as he felt her pussy squeeze on his fingers. “I cannot fault a woman for wanting to taste such an exaggerated display of masculine dominance.”

“Gonna make a guy feel jealous, talking like that.”

Laughing, the Prince clenched her insides on his fingers, hard, and he had to force them up toward the ceiling with more effort, fighting her squeezing muscles. She didn’t moan or groan, or whimper or mewl or any of that. She just lay back on him, and continued to caress her clitoris, as the two of them caressed and fondled her breasts with their free hands. Yeah, he got it. The fantasy she described wasn’t hers. Sitting in a tub and getting fingered by her lover boy was, evidently.

“What of Fiona? Has she spoken to you recently? I have noticed her interest in your partner Damien.”

Course she did; the Prince missed nothing. “Just a few text messages, about Eric’s place being safe from any Begotten burrowing in. I don’t think she heals as fast as us, so she’s still in her lair. Comes out for texting... like a girl addicted to her phone.”

They chuckled. It was both cute, and a major juxtaposition to what was inside the innocent-looking girl. Made it easier to think about Fiona, and not Vrall.

“For all my frustration at the presence of those monsters, Fiona has agreed to my terms and no longer kills without restraint. She is welcome in my city, while she obeys the rules.” Antoinette lifted a single leg out of the hot tub water, straight up, and Jack stared at the long, curvy, alabaster limb, before she lowered it again. He didn’t stop fingering her, and she didn’t stop stroking her clit, either. Showing off, blatantly. “And she is an awfully adorable little creature.”

“Jessy seems sure she’s got a sex-plagued mind.”

“Oh, she does, my little Ventrue. But she is young. Like you, she needs someone to siphon and nurture her desires.” Antoinette hugged her breasts, the one arm reaching underneath and wrapping the two of them together; barely. They were too large for her to capture so easily, but she managed, as she nudged her head up against his neck, and played with her clit faster. “If that someone is to be Damien, then I fear their first few times together will be clumsy. But, there is something delightful about two, unskilled partners, learning both each other’s desires, and honing sexual skills. An interesting way for two to grow closer.”

“I’ve been on the receiving end of all the teaching.” Now that Antoinette was holding her breasts together with her arm, they weren’t free to float around. But her nipples were still available, just above her forearm, and he started to apply a little more pressure to the swollen nub. In rhythm with him, she started to play with her clit faster, and he got the hint quick: finger her harder.

With her breasts wrapped, no longer floating in the hot tub water, they more or less stayed against her chest as he started to pound her. The water, already rolling waves from the jets, churned and splashed from the force of his hand moving up and down between her thighs. Antoinette’s whole body began to ripple, the impact of his fingers up against her g-spot spreading out and making her body jiggle. Of course, her breasts were like waves, bouncing back and forth against her forearm and chest.

Antoinette spread her legs, letting them shake and move with the water, as she started to cum. Without a word, she stopped massaging her clit, and raised the hand up her body to her breasts. No

longer wrapping them, she set a hand underneath each breast, and caressed them, gently massaged them, and tweaked one nipple while Jack continued to play with the other. He knew to be gentle while she came, and she rewarded him with a tiny moan.

“I have been considering hosting another banquet,” she said, mid orgasm, voice only wavering with the impact of his fingers. “With increased security this time, of course. I will not let hunters prevent us from living our lives.” Smiling up at him, she kissed his jaw again, and clenched on his fingers with her cunt until he was the one groaning, not her. The tight, soft flesh of her depths, squeezing on him so tight he could feel her muscles spasm with pleasure, was euphoric. It didn’t need to be his dick for it to be pleasurable, just holding the goddess on his body, feeling her back on his chest, and flesh around his fingers, sent shivers up and down his body.

“You uh... you have?” He eased his fingers out of her, and slid them up her stomach.

And just like that, like she didn’t just get thoroughly finger fucked to the point the hot tub water had been splashing everywhere, Antoinette nodded, and raised her hands to start counting things off on her fingers.

“Oui, but there are things to consider this time that I did not before. If I hold a banquet, it is to be protected, as I said. It is a way for me to prove to the covenants that these hunters do not control us, or frighten us to the point of paralysis. I must also consider that our relationship with the Uratha and Begotten have grown. Athalia and Fiona will take part again, I am sure, and perhaps Athalia will remain more than ten minutes.” Chuckling, she rolled over. The water made it easy, her body almost weightless, and she straddled his waist, knees against the hot tub seat edge. She grabbed his wrist, and guided his hand back to her slit. “Again.”

Gulping, he complied, and again, started to finger her. She put her hands on the hot tub edge, above the water, and smiled down at him, her breasts now free to dangle over the water surface. Dangle became wobble and shake, as he started to finger her pussy, and he groaned again as he felt more than just hot water drip down his hands.

“I think,” she continued, “more of Avery’s pack will attend this time, as well. It would be interesting to see if they would be willing to share their blood with some Kindred. I understand Natasha has grown to love the power of it, and so too has Jessy, I imagine. Tilly likely has as well. Perhaps we could find a male vampire to have a taste of Clara? Or female, if that would interest her.”

“You just want her away from me.” With a smile up at the goddess, he started fingering her harder, working his arm back and forth, hoping to hide the little bit of snark he put into his words.

“Oh, are you not a daring one today.” She raised a hand, and flicked him in the forehead. All this, while he continued to finger her, making her breasts sway in front of him, nipples grazing the surface of the water. They were still swollen, very swollen, and the Prince grinned at him as she cupped one breast, other hand on the tub ledge, and she began to caress and massage the engorged areola. “If she cannot have you — and she cannot — I would have her find someone else. I wish her no ill will, and it would be better for everyone if the Uratha, all of them, found happiness here.”

“You want them to stay?”

“I would be a fool to ignore their value, now that so many unwanted factors have disturbed my city’s once calm waters.” Antoinette set her forehead to his, red gaze grabbing his with all the subtlety of a dragon. “I also wonder if the Begotten might share some of their blood? But then, I imagine the blood of a monster of nightmares would not taste appealing.” So close, she grinned at him like a devil, like a succubus, and used both her hands to continue caressing her breasts, as he fingered her.

They both loved her breasts. There was something so insanely awesome about that. Maybe it was how he could lavish and fanboy over them, and instead of annoying her, she indulged in his attention. Or in this case, indulged in his enraptured gaze. The way they rippled and swayed as they hung underneath her was hypnotizing.

Then again, he loved it when she pinned him down and put a leash on him, something she seemed to delight in doing. A century’s worth of luck, distilled into the sexual chemistry the two seemed to have.

“Y-Yeah, maybe. I wonder if Damien has Kissed her? I could ask him.”

She kissed his forehead, and nudged her nose into his for a moment, before she let out a long, slow, deep sigh, and came again. It was subtle, her shoulders raising and her elbows pulling inward, as her eyes half closed. “I doubt he has. The boy is undoubtedly timid, when the affairs cross into personal,” she said, as her pussy gripped his digits. Her hands fell from her nipples, and instead clutched his shoulders, some of her weight still on where she pressed her forehead to his. Shivering, slightly, but her insides weren’t so subtle, clamping down, until he had to use his arm muscles to push his hand back and forth, slapping his fingers against her g-spot and churning the water again.

Finally, she reached down, and touched his wrist; a signal to stop. He kept his fingers inside her, but stop pumping his hand, letting her body grow still while tiny quivers worked up and down her body. Eventually he eased his fingers out of her slit as well, and smiled up at the beauty as he pulled up on her tiny bikini bottom, to hook it high along her hips again.

“Merci.” She leaned down, gave him a kiss, and stepped out of the hot tub. “I must begin managing and preparing my thralls now, my love. I will see you later tonight.” If it were Ashley or Julee, they’d be panting and floating in the tub, unable to walk. Antoinette, smiling and radiating orgasmic bliss, walked toward her chair, her legs shaking ever so slightly with orgasm aftershocks.

“I... I uh—”

“Oh non non, I will tend to your desires later.” She winked at him, ran a finger down her breast and the water that dripped from it, and fetched her robe from the lounge chair. Of course, she didn’t bother to close it up, and let it stay parted, exposing her breasts, and her still swollen nipples as she raised her hands to her hair; for no other reason than to torture him, he was sure. Combing back the long, wet strands up and over the robe behind her, she smiled at Jack as she did. “Knowing that you will lust for me, all night, as you tend to your tasks? That tonight, I will lay in bed for you, let you straddle my chest, and hold my breasts together for you to slip your length into? Knowing that such thoughts will haunt your mind all night long, pleases me.”

His jaw dropped. There was a reason she didn’t ask him to Blush for her: the blue balls would have killed him. She was a devil woman!

“And just a few nights ago, you warned me about getting addicted to sex.”

“Only to a point, of course.” She sat down on a lounge chair a few feet from him, and as she let the Blush of Life fade away, she started brushing her hair with a brush she’d brought. Still with her robe open, of course, so he could stare and admire her body. “There are cities where elder Kindred are addicted, combining the pleasures of the flesh with the pleasures of the Kiss, to the point it dominates their way of life. You think my banquets overly sexual, and yet I have once seen a council of Invictus, in another city long ago, three women and two men. Each had a ghoul with them, their blood in a glass to drink, while those same ghouls proceeded to suckle and lick their slits, or swallow their shafts. They had their meetings this way, cumming onto the warm mouths of their servants, as they discussed matters of the city. When the meetings were over, they would go back to their mansions, or into their underground labyrinths, where they kept many thralls. For them, the Kiss was more pleasurable than sex, but they mixed the two, as all Kindred do. They mixed them while bathing in decadence, however, and would conduct other meetings, teach pupils, arrange tasks, and delegate responsibilities, all while their harems pleased their bodies and bled into their mouths.”

“Holy shit. I... I guess, in comparison, we’re not nearly that bad.”

“We are not, non. But it is a slippery slope, my little Ventrue, one I have been down. Do not fret, I will make sure we continue to balance. Matters of business, or of survival, are not to be mixed with

sexuality or the Kiss. But during our free time, when we have time to spare? By all means, let us indulge our desires. And if you wish to exploit the power of vitae, to indulge in sex for far longer than any normal human could, continue to do so. What matters is that you learn to leave it behind when the time comes to focus on other things.”

“That why you’re torturing me tonight?” He gave her his best pouting eyes.

She laughed. No dice. “Non. I torture you because you are mine, and a little teasing, or torture, is a part of that arrangement.”

Pouting failed, he climbed out of the tub, and reached for a towel. At least without the Blush of Life, he could walk around without an erection.

“I’m off to see Avery then.”

“Please do.”

“So... how many thralls do you actually have bound to you?”

She laughed at him as she continued brushing her hair, before getting up and walking toward the exit, likely to go back to her room and put on a suit. “I have eyes everywhere, my love. And you can tell your council that, for all their might, they lack the subtlety needed to rule a city.”

The Invictus wanted to rule with money and might, and that often meant a bunch of thralls with a bunch of guns, according to Julias. Unfortunately, they didn’t know much about where Antoinette kept her thralls, or what sort of training they had. It made large maneuvers difficult, and unnerving, knowing she was watching.

He put up his hands in surrender. “I’m not subtle?”

“You are about as subtle as lightning come nightfall, my love.”

“Bleh.”

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“You’re all fucking idiots.”

Jack winced, and looked down. Yeah, that was true, but Avery could be a little nicer about it.

“Kid did alright,” Noah said, adjusting the blinds so he could look out Eric’s window better.

Avery, sitting on the couch with Clara, looked over her shoulder and frowned at the man. But Jack knew she didn't have much to say, if she was going to look for the specific flaws in their plan. There'd been flaws, but not in the choices they made once they were in the shit. They all knew it, too.

Except, Jessy wasn't content to just know. "They rescued me, your girl, and my boy here, because they went in guns blazing. What was the time, from when we vanished, to when you guys were in there after us, Jack?"

"Bit over an hour."

"That is fucking fast, considering he recruited two monsters and three werewolves, too." Jessy snapped her fingers, summarizing speed with the sound. She was leaning against the kitchen table, arms folded across her chest, and Eric was next to her. Two vampires and four werewolves, discussing the aftermath.

"I'm sorry, I'll rephrase." Avery pointed a finger at Jessy. "You're an idiot because you picked a fight whenever you could, instead of looking for information." A finger for Eric. "You're an idiot because you're still green and refuse to let us teach you anything." A finger for Clara. "You're an idiot for thinking it was a good idea to push forward, instead of waiting for backup." A finger for Noah. "You're an idiot for getting decked by an explosive behind a door. You're a planner. Plan better." And finally a finger for Jack, of course. "You're an idiot for going out of your way so hard, to help this Azamel monster."

He sighed, and leaned back in the recliner. Eric's apartment was a really nice place, massive, luxurious, and the repairs had been done quickly; Invictus money was a powerful thing indeed.

"Azamel has—"

"Done nothing." Avery threw up her hands before resting her forehead in one. "She has done nothing, but you continue to go to bat for her."

She had done something. She warned him about the inevitable threat Dolareido faced, something the Prince herself had not, despite her awareness of it. He understood why, but still.

"Fiona and Athalia helped rescue us," Eric said. "They work for her, and came because she asked them to go, I think." Everyone in the room looked at him, eyebrows raising. He wasn't in a pack or covenant, so talking at all was kind of bold. And the awkward, slightly annoyed expression matched what Jack knew of the man. He didn't want to be a part of any of this, but was getting dragged into it against his will. Poor guy.

“Eric is correct,” Jack said. “As much as hunters being in Dolareido is largely her fault, she’s trying to help.”

Avery continued to sigh, but after a while, put her hand back down and leaned into the couch. “Sorry if I don’t sound grateful. You saved my girl, and this fucker.” She made a small wave in Eric’s direction.

“I resent that,” Eric said.

“Yeah, well, suck it up.” Avery leaned in, elbows on her knees, facing Jack. “On the other side of the wall, the city is in a strange state. You got those three fuckers, Black Blood, Street-Tail King, and Red Tide, fighting for sections of the city, but these hunters have introduced... complications.”

Jack put up a hand. “Why are you telling me this? Shadow World isn’t exactly... well, you’ve made it abundantly clear you don’t want vamps sticking their feet in it.”

“That was before things started getting out of hand. Besides, you’ve proven you’re willing to go the extra mile to make sure shit gets done. Saving Clara—”

“Don’t forget,” Noah said, “it was Jacob and Black Blood that saved us.”

“Yeah, that has blurred the lines on a lot of shit too.” Groaning, Avery got up, and started pacing around, arms across her chest and hand raised to hold her chin. Classic thinking pose, and Jack struggled to not smile as he watched the small, deadly woman walk around like she owned the place. “I’m not throwing my pack into a meat grinder, but the way things are going, it’s looking like it’ll be for the best if we help you out.”

Jessy cheered. Everyone stared at her, until she lowered her hands.

“Thanks,” Jack said. It was only a matter of time, he supposed. Avery wanted to stick around, to live in Dolareido, and she wouldn’t be able to do that if the hunters ruined things. Now that it was clear the hunters had far more tools at their disposal than anyone could have predicted, she felt inclined to help.

Or, it was because Jeremiah mentioned her specifically, before Black Blood saved them. The others must have heard it, and heard how Jack had tried to lie to Jeremiah about who it was. Point for him, he supposed.

“Yeah don’t thank us just yet.” Avery walked over to him, and flicked him in the forehead. Familiar. “There is so much crap rolling your way, it’s ridiculous. No wonder David guided us here. Every fucking day, the echoes of horrible shit hits everywhere nearby, in the Hisil. It’s not a

coincidence so much insanity is hitting this city in such a small amount of time. Enough Azlu for two full grown hosts? Then hunters show up, and they have a Begotten with them? Something is going on.”

Something was going on, but no one knew what the fuck it was. He doubted the hunters knew, considering the nature of Azamel’s warning. She didn’t want him telling anyone else about it, paranoid about the information tipping someone off, and Jack couldn’t fathom that having anything to do with an army of bloodthirsty hunters coming for her head.

If the sheriff had found anything, he wasn’t sharing it, beyond his discoveries of Elen’s rituals.

“The... Prince has a request,” he said. And now for the hard part.

Avery rolled her eyes, again, and sat back down with Clara. “Hit me.”

“The covenants are going to start putting teams together of Kindred they trust to handle themselves. Three Kindred to a team. They’re going to be doing sweeps of areas in the city, using what little we know to find them. And—”

“And you’d like one of my pack to come along with these teams.”

“Yeah. You got the nose and the ears for hunting, in ways not even our Gangrels can match.”

Jessy made a snort noise, but shrugged and looked to the window. “True enough.”

Jack threw a smile her way. Jealous, of Uratha hunting abilities? Weird. But then, he wasn’t a Gangrel. He didn’t know what it was like to have the beast riding the edge of his consciousness, unless he was utterly starving. Maybe she had some professional envy.

Avery looked up, eyes rooting through her brain, and she touched her chin a couple times as she juggled the thoughts. “Has our relationship progressed to that point?”

Oh boy, negotiating, with a werewolf. This was going to be fun. Not.

“I like to think it has. We worked together to save our kind from the hunters, and we worked together well... more or less. And you just said you were willing to help, sort of.”

“Kid’s right,” Noah said. “Not that I think we should be throwing ourselves into this war with these hunters. David brought us here for different reasons, and so far it’s looking like they need our help. I vote we squeeze more out of them.”

Ok, Avery was brutal, but Noah was heartless. God damn.

“This isn’t about hitting them for money, Noah,” Clara said.

“You sure? Having a few million dollars under our belt could help us make some city renovations.”

Jack put up his hands. “The Invictus are willing to throw some money your way. Some. Millions might a bit much to ask...” Jack was making premium bank now, and he didn’t have anywhere near that much saved up yet. Xnomina did, no doubt, but their funds weren’t endless. “Far cheaper for us if you guys accepted assets that we—”

“Noah’s just being a sarcastic ass, Jack.” Avery wiped a hand aside, dismissing her comrade’s words. “Besides, this is a request from big tits, right?”

“I, uh... yes.” Big tits was not a nickname he expected Antoinette would appreciate. Not because it wasn’t accurate, but the woman did not like the sort of friendly prattle or good-natured ribbing you found from people like the Uratha, or anyone in the Carthians. Jack could relate; he found it grating and juvenile, sometimes. This was one of those times, and he struggled to not frown. It could have been a test from Avery too, to see if he’d react, get defensive, and lower his guard.

“You let me see the teams, and let me choose which member goes with which team, and I’ll do it.”

Finally! Progress.

“Really?” Clara said.

“Yeah, really. But, you also have to convince Azamel to join in, have her buddies join some of these groups, too.”

He winced, and looked down. “I’m meeting her later tonight. I’ll run it by her. The Primogen and the Prince thought this might come up, but they’re not sure. Azamel’s half the reason the hunters are here at all”—if not the full reason—“and the elders aren’t exactly keen on having them work beside us.” As per usual, he pushed for allowing the Begotten to be a part of their efforts, as they were when they helped rescue Jessy. As per usual, the Primogen and Prince didn’t like it, but they managed to understand his position, if only a little.

“Yeah, well, those are my terms. Take it or leave it. The hunters have a fucking monster working for them, and I’m not stupid enough to risk joining your sweepers without a little help from people who understand how one of them work.”

“Understandable. I might be able to convince Azamel to get Mark to help, but Fiona’s just a kid, and Athalia... well, yeah.” It was easier to think about Angela without his insides turning to fire, if he didn’t say her name out loud.

“Fiona’s a kid?” Noah came to the couch with the rest of his buddies, and set his butt against its arm.

“She is,” Eric said with a quiet grumble.

Noah shook his head. Forever calm, this man, such a juxtaposition to the fancy artwork of his tattoos. At first glance, he looked like a new age artist. The moment he opened his mouth, he sounded like a lawyer. “Last I checked, she’s got a very high kill count. Higher than a lot of us in this room, I imagine, if we’re looking at human kills only.”

“She killed people who deserve it,” Jack said, “but I see what you mean.”

Avery shook her head, not satisfied. “Get Fiona and Mark, and get Athalia too. I have to know she’s not going to stab me in the back, if we stumble across her insane daughter.”

Fucking lovely.

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“Jessy driving you to drink, yet?” he said, once they were outside.

“Heh, no. But she’s definitely a handful.”

Jack needed a buddy on his trip to see Azamel, for the buddy system, and Eric had offered. The man must have had an ulterior motive, something he wanted to ask of the old monster, but it was a good opportunity for Jack to learn more about the man. Knowledge was power; Julias rubbing off on him.

The two of them were in suits, Jack in his proper Invictus business suit, the sort used for deadly meetings, and seeing the other paranormals. Eric’s suit was a little more casual, and befitting the fun nature of a night club. All his suits were for that purpose, he supposed.

“Yeah, handful is a nice way of putting it,” Jack said.

Laughing, Eric shook his head, entertained by a memory.

The two of them walked the sidewalks, through the crowds of people, and past the glowing signs of open bars, casinos, and strip joints. Once, they’d been so intimidating. Now, they were a part of Jack’s nightlife. Hell, if he wanted to, he could walk into one of the strip clubs, sit down, and only feel partially uncomfortable, instead of horribly. In a bar, he could manage to flirt a bit, catch a woman’s eye, or a man’s if needed, and draw them into conversation. A little conversation made it easy to use

Dominate, and turn his prey into his puppet for a quick Kiss, once out of the bar and into an alley. That is, if he bothered with Dominate. A kind smile and a couple drinks was enough to get many people to trust him, he was discovering.

“How did a little guy like you hook up with a femme fatale like Antoinette? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I showed up at Bloodlust, really hungry and looking for a meal. I didn’t know what I was doing at the time, still brand new to being Kindred, but my sire wanted me to get used to taking advantage of the best place for finding a meal.” Laughing, Jack looked up to the rooftops above, scanning for movement. “I was antisocial as fuck, and very much out of my element. I ran into her at the club, and she threw me a bone. We talked, and we got along.”

“She seems... a bit of an ice queen.”

Jack burst into laughter, and held out a hand against a street lamp to catch himself before he fell. “Y-Yeah, she can seem like that, until you get to know her. Except, unless you piss her off, then I suppose it’s apt.”

After a while, they drifted along and found one of the old street stairs down into the subway. No one looked at them for any longer than a second, likely thinking two guys in a suit walking down stairs to a locked door either wanted to chat in privacy, get a blowjob in privacy, or they had keys. People were so carefree in Dolareido. Vampire utopia, indeed.

As he went down, he looked up to the rooftops again, and continued scanning.

“Looking for something? Think we’re being stalked?”

“I hope we are.”

“Say what?”

“My—ah, there they are.” Jack held out his arm, and gave Eric a small nod.

The man jumped back, eyes wide as two sets of black wings came out of no where, flying in from above as silent as a grave. Mulder and Scully perched on his arm, and then his shoulder once comfortable, Mulder hopping over to sit on his opposite shoulder.

“You two alright?” he said.

The two birds nodded, and pecked at his ears a few times with their beaks. Ow. It’d taken a lot of research to learn that birds pecked at each other for many reasons, often just to be friendly. Little nibbles were just a part of owning birds.

“You own crows?” Eric said.

“Not really own, no. But I started taking care of these two, not too long ago.” He set a hand to Scully’s head, and scratched gently under the feathers behind her skull. “Crows are damn smart.”

“Yeah, but, pets? I can understand parrots.”

“Not my pets. They’re free to come and go, but I’ve established a connection with them.” He leaned in toward Mulder, and the crow nestled his head against Jack’s jaw, under his ear. “Vampires can communicate with animals, and control them. Gangrels like Jessy, and Ventrue like me, can do it easily.” He wasn’t sure if giving Eric info about Kindred was the best idea, but the man seemed alright to trust with basic info, at this point.

“Did you name them?”

“... I did.”

“Pets.”

Rolling his eyes, Jack opened the door to the abandoned subway with the key. “You two going to be ok?”

The two crows nodded, fluffed their feathers a bit, and snuggled in close to his neck for a second. A couple of caws to confirm, before Jack stepped into the underground.

The darkness of the tunnels. There were lights, but old and dingy. Mulder and Scully flapped their wings for a moment, before Mulder flew over to land on one of the many railings that sat on the abandoned platform. No subway cars. The ones that’d been destroyed by the Uratha were still fresh in his mind, many months later. Torn apart like toilet paper.

Jack pulled out some oats for the crows, but only a little. Hard to feed them and walk at the same time.

“Why you bringing them?” Eric said.

“They’re my eyes and ears. And birds notice things humans, or vampires or werewolves, wouldn’t. You never know.”

“You didn’t bring them to visit Avery.”

“I did. They were watching from outside.”

The crows nodded, and Mulder cawed from his perch, as Scully turned to make a few quiet croons. Jack clucked his tongue at her quietly, some light touches of the tongue tip against the roof of

his mouth. A bit of vitae, raised to the surface, raised into his mind, to turn the croons his feather friend made, into images, sounds, and smells his brain could understand.

The images filled his mind. The outside of Eric's apartment, viewed from a great height. Then movement, as Scully flew down to find a perch on a nearby building. Eric's apartment was high, but Jack had pointed it out to them before he went in. The blinds were closed, but unlike the bedroom window, the living room and kitchen windows had normal blinds. With the lights on, the silhouettes of people were visible.

But as far as Jack could tell, nothing seemed out of the ordinary; except, for the unusual amount of people on the rooftops. Normally that number was zero, but the birds, more than just Mulder and Scully, noticed many new human faces up in the skies with them. Three were nearby in the bird's memory, each on a different rooftop. Two he knew as Invictus thralls, and trained snipers. The other though, was one of Antoinette's thrall.

A bird's eye view put the strange tension between the Ordo Dracul and the Invictus into perspective. Snipers on rooftops, and spies spying on each other. They shared Dolareido's sky, and had to get along. How Antoinette managed that, Jack would never understand, knowing how much of a totalitarian Viktor had been.

"You vamps like to think in sneaky ways," Eric said.

"Unfortunately, being sneaky is the only tried and true way to survive for centuries."

"I guess."

Jack looked at the man for a moment as they walked. He looked stressed. But then, he seemed like the kinda guy who was always stressed. Jack knew where some of his salary was going, too, considering it was all Invictus money. One of the joys of being a Right Hand, knowing where all the money went, except for council expenditures.

Ask him about his dad? No, that'd be way too weird. They barely knew each other. And besides, Jack's dad was dead, and this guy's dad was dying. Not the same thing.

"Gonna join Avery's pack?" There, much better topic of conversation. Valuable information, and something that Eric was undoubtedly thinking about.

"I doubt it."

Uh oh. Julias wanted him to follow Avery's lead. So did Antoinette.

"Why not?"

“I’m not interested in a new family. Got enough shit with my own family.”

“I uh, don’t think Avery’s pack is really... no, you’re right, they’re a family. How about just taking some lessons from her, about the Shadow Realm?”

That managed to make the man twitch.

“I don’t want anything to do with spirits.”

“I got the impression you didn’t really have a choice in the matter? Kinda like, I have to drink blood to survive. If I eat a salad or a piece of meat, I’ll spend hours puking that up.” He hadn’t tried, but Julius had told him what happened to Kindred who had. And, by the grace of God or whoever, Jack seemed to have enough intelligence to not have to try something for himself to learn a lesson.

“Yeah, I guess. They... they’re... yeah.” Sighing, Eric stopped. Jack stopped as well, and raised a brow as he turned to look back at the man. “You seem like a smart kid.”

“You could say that.” Ah, the stroked ego. His Ventrue pride swelled, and Jack shook his head once to try and dislodge the feeling.

“I’m getting pulled in three directions. Really, I just want people to leave me alone. But I know that won’t happen, so... what would you do?”

“What would I do? I can barely understand your predicament. I have... no idea what’s it like, to suddenly be a werewolf. I know what it’s like to wake up one night, dead, with a bunch of knife wounds in the stomach. I know what it’s like to suddenly crave blood like it’s heroin and I’m a junkie. I know what it’s like to see every human around as a source of food, instead of people, when the hunger rises. I’m sure you have your own urges, things that weren’t there before, things that dominate your mind now. Without help, without someone to explain to me what the fuck was going on, I would have been lost, and probably dead by now.”

“So I should join Avery’s pack.”

“I... think you should do whatever gets you the most information. That means Avery. I’m sure she’ll tell you a few things, show you a few things, and at worst, you’ll owe her. Don’t need to join her.”

“And if my gut says—”

“Your gut is a child’s reflex. Everyone’s ‘gut’,”—he raised his fingers to air quote the stupid word—“is a childish impulse. Your gut is your emotions overriding your thinking. Your gut... your gut is to be ignored, Eric, like the whiny baby that it is. Everyone’s gut feelings are useless, whiny baby

noises. Sometimes it can help in a pinch, when you need to make a split second decision, and there's some subconscious reasoning happening. Most of the time, it's idiotic, shortsighted, emotional garbage. Ignore your gut, flip the switch, and make a decision using as much information and evidence as you can get your hands on." At some point, Jack had started to raise his voice, almost yelling at the bigger, stronger guy. Jack was reasonably sure he could dominate this man's mind if it came to blows, so he wasn't scared of him. That wasn't an excuse for getting angry with him, when Eric was making the same mistake everyone made.

"You sound like... a smart guy."

Jack smiled at the man, and continued walking once Eric started walking too. "I try." It was one of the ways he and Antoinette connected. Talking about things, real things, and peeling back emotional bullshit and dogma, so they could talk about any topic conceivable without prejudice or bias, was something they both enjoyed doing.

"Do you trust Azamel?"

"That... is a better question." Shrugging, Jack held up some more oats for Scully and Mulder, as Eric and him rounded a corner in the tunnels, tracks beneath him growing darker in the flickering light. "I trust her more than others do."

"Sounds like she just wants to be left alone."

That was the connection, then. Azamel wanted to be left to her business, and Eric was identifying with that. It was a reasonable way for the two forces to see eye to eye, but Eric was young by paranormal standards, and easily controlled; as much as you could control a werewolf. Azamel had the chops to not only fend for herself, but the smarts to manipulate a man like Eric into helping her, serving as a bodyguard or something.

But then, if he tried to exist as his own person, and not affiliate with anyone, the Kindred would eventually force him into something. It was a weird position to be in, especially since his dad was in the hospital, care being paid for by the First Estate.

"She does want to be left alone. And she could have done that somewhere else," Jack said. "Not that... I don't know, I don't understand the Begotten, no one does. Maybe running somewhere else would have meant starving to death. But she came here and brought a lot of trouble with her. I think she's trying to help undo some of that damage, but that doesn't change how much shit is happening because of these hunters. Barry's dead." And Isabella was still royally pissed about it. "And you nearly died, twice now, because of the hunters, if I'm counting right."

“Yeap, you are.” The man pat a spot on his chest. “I looked that fucker Jeremiah in the eye as he stabbed me. Dude’s a Hollywood psychopath.”

“Hollywood psychopath. I suppose that’s a way to put it.” And a good one. Jeremiah had the sort of charisma and determination you found in movie villains, and Angela was his psychopath twice-over student.

“You regret not killing her?”

Jack winced, and both crows managed a rather annoyed caw at Eric. He pulled back his head, until Jack reached up to stroke Mulder, the closer crow, on his breast feathers. No need to make enemies of Eric, guys.

“Yeah, I do regret it,” Jack said.

“Sore spot?”

“Very.”

Nodding, Eric scratched the back of his neck, and continued walking. Jack had expected an apology, but the man didn’t seem to have that inclination, as if the apology had been implied by his question of sore spot. Just like Jessy would have done.

Jack smiled at that.

Eventually they reached Azamel’s hole in the ground. Why the woman never bothered trying to spruce up the place, try and make it home, he didn’t know. It was a concrete stage, with a shitty bed, a shitty old rocking chair, some room dividers, a couple couches, and no place to poop. Did Begotten need to poop?

Azamel was there, as was Mark, and Fiona. No Athalia though.

“Eric! Jack!” Fiona hopped off the stage, ran over to them, and hugged them. If she noticed the crows or not, it didn’t stop her, and both birds had to make for the air to escape getting squashed. “How are ye feeling? Are—hey!” Scully didn’t appreciate it, and landed on her head, to begin a terrible assault of pecking her skull, wings flapping. “Sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Hey! Come on.” Jack reached out, and Scully returned, hopping down his wrist and arm, before returning to his shoulder. “Treat the lady nice.”

“Aye, treat her nice.” Beaming, Fiona smiled up at the birds on his shoulders. “This is very classic vampire. Sexy, with the suit.”

“Makes you wonder how many other Kindred are doing similar.” Nodding, Jack also offered a nod to Mark, and a proper deep nod to Azamel. “Hello.”

Azamel blew a cloud smoke his way, but otherwise, didn't do much but continue rocking in her chair. “Hello.”

“Athalia still healing?”

Fiona jumped in front of him a couple times, before she walked back to the stage, and sat on its edge. “Aye, she was really beat up. Loads of bullet holes that are taking a long time to heal properly. She's getting hungry, too.”

A hungry Begotten had a certain hint of danger to it that a hungry Kindred didn't. A monster needing to feed was a whole different animal to a blood sucker, Athalia would probably say.

Jack glanced at Eric, who had taken a moment to find a wall to lean against. The suit, oh man, the poor suit. “Azamel, I wanted to know if you had any... updates, I guess? Just had a meeting with Avery.”

The old woman shrugged, blew some more smoke, and looked at Eric. “Why bring him?”

“Eric's caught up in this, and—”

“You nearly got me killed, you old bat.”

Jack and Fiona winced, and looked at the man. Hell, he thought he saw Mark wince too.

“Excuse me?”

Eric pushed from the wall, and walked up to Azamel, glaring at her with every step. His glare didn't have the murderous intent Jack thought he might find there, but he was annoyed nonetheless, hands in his pockets and a frown carved into his face.

“A hunter, a Begotten nonetheless, showed up at my apartment. Kidnapped me. Asked me questions about you. Some freaky shaman sack of wrinkles cut into me, looking to... use my body to learn about you.” He gestured to Jack, and Jack froze. “I was going to be tortured, and probably have my guts spilled for that bitch to read, like... like...”

Jack raised a hand. “Haruspex.”

Everyone glared at him. Yeah, smart to know, not so smart to say right now.

“Haruspex. I would have died, so these freaks could find you and kill you.”

“Then it’s a good thing I sent Athalia and Fiona to rescue you.” She let the smoke come out of her as she spoke. If smoking was a sport, she’d be an olympian. “And I did not do those things to you, they did.”

“You brought them—”

“If they were not chasing me, then they would be chasing someone else, fool. The vampires have not removed me because they understand that. And they understand that we have a better chance of defeating the hunters together.”

And the vampires would have a hell of a tough time removing her, from what Julias told Jack.

Azamel’s explanation seemed to calm Eric down, and he managed a small smile for Fiona again, before he leaned against the wall of dirty concrete behind him. If the man was ever going to make a decision about who he was going to lean toward, Jack couldn’t tell. What did Jessy tell him? Probably something like ‘dude you’re a werewolf now, partner with whoever you want’, which made sense if you were a wanted player. And Eric was a wanted player, if only because he was a powerful entity. His ability to enter the Shadow World was icing on that cake.

“She’s right,” Jack said, “to an extent. Dolareido’s been low on the radar for a long time, and the Prince works hard to keep it that way. But... but things have been happening, and we’re drawing attention to the city, on multiple fronts.” The deaths of three elders and invasion of two fucking spider monsters, one of which was still alive according to Avery, was a precursor to the arrival of the hunters. The mysterious warning Azamel had given him was a continuation of the shit rolling their way. “Azamel showing up, and all the shit happening she’s getting blamed for, is more post hoc ergo propter hoc.”

Everyone raised a brow at him.

“Post hoc fallacy,” Mark said, everyone jerking their head his way. The man barely ever said a thing. “Azamel shows up, and shit starts going horribly. People think she started the bad shit, when she didn’t. Not all of it, at least.”

Azamel snorted, coughed several times, and blew some smoke at her companion. “Thanks, asshole.” Sighing, she tapped the cigarette against her tray, and Jack winced as he saw a bit of the ashes fall onto her typical, old, dingy grandma clothes. There was a monster in that old woman, a colossal creature of nightmares, and he half expected her to pass out in her rocking chair with a lit cigarette, and set herself on fire.

She was desperate to get something done before old age took her. Nothing was as scary as someone pushed to the edge of their life, in whatever circumstance, with nothing left to lose.

“I also came to let you know,” Jack said, “that we’re going to start active sweeps of the city and the tunnels. Kindred are tripling up, and hopefully with Avery’s help, we can track these fuckers down proper.” Ok, time for the difficult part of the conversation. “We want your help with some of these groups.”

Azamel coughed once again, and hard. The room stopped and waited as the woman tore up her lungs, though from the way she tensed her body with each cough, it was obvious she was practiced. “My help?”

“Well, not your help, specifically,” he said. “Fiona, Mark... Athalia.”

The woman lit up another cigarette, fighting her shaking hands every moment of the process. “You’re asking a lot, boy.”

His turn to frown. Considering how much of their predicament was her fault, directly or indirectly, it was not an unrealistic request. “The situation requires a lot. That shaman woman’s rituals are an ever present threat. She’ll kill again, find some other person to do her craziness to, and then Eric or me will have hunters tracking us down again. Because of you.”

“Because of me?”

“You’re the connection in these rituals.”

She blew a cloud of smoke at him. There was a good fifteen feet between them, and yet she managed to spear the smoke enough so it hit him anyway. Impressive, and fucking annoying.

“Others have visited me. Many have, in fact. The difference between them, and you, is that you and Eric are young and weak. Easily beaten. Or so they believed.” Shrugging, she gestured to Mark and Fiona. “I will speak with Athalia later. You two, think you can help the leeches and dogs with their hunts?”

“... fine,” Mark said.

Fiona, as Jack figured, jumped up and skipped over to him. Skipped. With her large bust, it was pretty distracting, and he forced himself to not stare. After what Antoinette did to him a few hours ago, the last thing he needed was to see a pair of big breasts bouncing around. Weak, man, so weak.

“I’d love to! Who’s going with who?”

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~~Damien~~

The Grand Cathedral of Dolareido. It was hard to look at it the same way anymore, for a variety of reasons. The most obvious, he supposed, was that it was once the primary HQ of his sire and master, Lucas. But now that the veil of that psychopath's teachings were fading, and the intrusive, reflexive thoughts of judgment and guilt were disappearing into the ether, the cathedral looked different because of how much it did not fit the rest of Dolareido. If all roads went to Rome, then the same could be said for the gambling and club district of South Side. Money, sex, drugs, all things he'd been taught to despise in some form or another, to discourage kine from enjoying, and now, they were a frequent part of his life.

Or at least, money was. Sex and drugs? The kine he used to punish for such acts, he no longer punished. He wondered about the capacity of his new role as arbiter for the Lancea et Sanctum, and how it rarely involved punishing kine for their transgressions. It made him feel guilty, for daring to stand in the face of the Grand Cathedral, when he hadn't done what he was taught was a requirement of his role.

But, it was the dawn of a new age, and for a new approach. No longer a slave to dogma and mindless traditionalism, he had to reconsider a myriad of things in the light of, what Jack described as intellectualism, or healthy skepticism. Lucas would have called it a lack of faith in the Lord. The duality fought in his mind, and Damien had to make an effort to think through the fog and noise.

It was a mental battle he fought every time he walked up the stairs to the giant door, passed the gargoyles that sat upon ledges and railings, the angels and demons that sat upon engravings over the door, and finally, the crucifix above as he entered the cathedral. Empty. The many pews held no one, which made sense; for now. It was taking time to create an understanding between him and Maria, and the Prince, about what capacity the Lancea et Sanctum could operate in. If they weren't careful, Antoinette would shut down their efforts.

There was no music, either. Maria often spent the some late hours in the night playing, and introducing him to classical musicians: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and others like Chopin and Vivaldi. Perhaps she was down in her bunker, with her piano, and the books and various artifacts of the Lancea et Sanctum. Cataloging what she'd managed to save from Garry's vandalism, taking digital pictures,

creating digital lists, had become a pastime for him. He enjoyed the peace and quiet of it, to be alone with the mountain of information, and glimpses into the past.

He walked through the nave, up past the raised platform with the podium, and past that to find the pipe organ. Such a grand, majestic instrument. An imposing instrument. He sat down upon the bench, and set his hands on the keys. Maria had said his lessons had progressed well, well enough to attempt playing the infinitely more difficult instrument. The issue was the complexity of four levels of keys, and the foot pedals. Maria insisted he need not worry about the dozens of dials that surrounded him, and only concern himself with the different octaves available to him.

He set his fingers on the keys, and played a simple chord. The difference between a percussion and wind instrument was blatant, and he stopped as he struggled with the way holding a key on an organ created a consistent note. There was no impact, no strike of the inner workings of a piano against strings, only the overwhelming power of the wind within the pipes, filling the church.

He tried again. Maria had insisted he learn Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, not as his first piece but as the piece that would hook him, pull him into the mournful beauty of classical music. It was a sentiment he was starting to agree with.

He set his left hand on the first layer of keys, low toward his lap, and his right hand a layer higher; manuals, Maria called them. This second one had a far more gentle sound, perhaps to offset the thicker chords played on the first manual? With the organ, the sound didn't die, but resonated as long as he held the keys down; it felt unnatural, and he was afraid it'd overwhelm the melody he played with the right hand. But he continued, and trusted the arrangement Maria had created.

It did sound divine. He was not skilled enough to close his eyes, but he almost did, as he let the somber, heavy sound fill him. No wonder the song was played everywhere, to the point of ridiculous cliché. The chills it sent up his spine, as the sound overwhelmed the church, was intoxicating, and he smiled as he began to melt into it.

"You need to wear a cape and some mascara, to get away with playing that."

He jerked his head to the side, and sighed relief as he watched Beatrice saunter up to him. "Do I?"

"Yeah. You'd know that if you watched more TV. Aaaaand did I sneak up on you?"

"I was... distracted. It takes a lot of focus to play this instrument, and I am a beginner."

"And you're here alone. What happened to the buddy system?" She slid up to the instrument, and leaned against one of the wooden panels that surrounded it. A crass woman, but not nearly as bad as Jessy, to his delight.

“Maria’s nest below is very defensible.”

“Ah yeah, I guess. She here?”

“I do not believe so.”

Nodding, Triss sat on a nearby railing, jeans on the wood. “Good. I wanted to talk to you solo.”

“About?” He looked back to the keys in front of him, and set his hands on them in preparative positions. He didn’t play, though. It’d be rude to interrupt the Nosferatu. But he couldn’t deny he was excited to play more on the strange, monolithic instrument.

“I... wanted to apologize. About giving you some of my blood.”

“Ah yes, that.” Sighing, he turned to face her, one knee on the bench and foot out to the side to rest upon his other. “It was undeniable, that... that it’d happened. I woke up with a strange desire to see you, for no reason whatsoever.”

“Creepy.”

“Worse were the cravings for more. I wanted another taste of vitae, from anyone.” Nodding, he gestured to her with a shrug. “It faded. A single taste was not enough to ruin me. And you saved my life with that move, dangerous as it was.”

“That’s true, yeah. I could have let you die.”

“Something tells me the other Kindred would have been upset you didn’t do the only option available to you.”

“Also true.” Laughing, she nodded again, and kicked her feet a few times down against the floor, as if to admire the sound it made, how it echoed out of the chamber before disappearing into the acoustic panels hidden behind pillars. “So we square?”

Square. Sometimes it was easy to forget the eras Kindred came from. Beatrice grew up in the seventies and eighties.

“I was never angry with you.”

“Good, cause... yeah. I thought you might have been upset I might have gotten you addicted to vitae, or, you know, me.”

“I am not addicted to vitae, and it would take a lot of blood to get me addicted to you.”

Beatrice blinked at him, several times, before she laughed. Loudly. Her crocodile mouth opened wide, and her laughter echoed through the church.

“Did you just make a joke?”

“... I suppose.”

“And here I was thinking you were incapable of anything other than cold, hard thoughts.” She smiled at him, which looked a little strange considering she had no cheeks, crocodile teeth along her jaw, but a normal looking mouth. All her facial expressions were a bit strange, as well, especially with her serpent eyes looking at him.

“I’ve tried to... change, as of late.”

“Haven’t we all.” She winked at him, and leaned in. “A little birdie told me you and Fiona are getting along.”

Who was this woman? He remembered glimpses of the young Nosferatu when she was a Carthian, and hung out in catacombs. Like many of the cursed Kindred, she spent her younger years underground, hiding her disfigurements, and becoming as antisocial as he’d been. She was a completely different person now, who made no effort to hide her crocodile teeth where her cheeks should have been. Her small claws on her fingers, her snake eyes, all of that was forgotten to her, with zero body language meant to hide them.

Her new life agreed with her. A witch, and lover to the strongest ancilla in the city; along with her friend to share the bed. The typical Dolareido effect, dialing the sex factor of everything up to extreme.

“I... do have a date planned with her.” For some reason, everyone had become interested in his dating life. It was annoying, but he couldn’t deny he listened to advice when it came his way, about this particular topic. He had no experience of romance, even when he was human. Blurry memories, at best.

“She seems fun. I wish you lots of great sex.” With a salute, Beatrice hopped off the railing, and started out of the church. “I—” She stopped, voice grinding to a halt, as the cathedral doors opened.

Maria.

She was wearing one of her typical white dresses, the sort worn a couple hundred years ago, with small buttons done up the front, connected to a multi-layered skirt. The dress was in good condition, and that always struck Damien as harsh contrast against her ruined skin.

Had these two ever met? Ever talked? He had no idea, and he stood up before walking over to Beatrice to stand behind and beside her.

“Madam Turio,” he said. “I was trying to learn how to use the organ, when Beatrice came by to visit.”

“Alone?” the elder said. “The pairing system applies to all Kindred in the city, Damor. Jacob will not be happy if a passerby saw through your Cloak of Night, and cut off your head.”

Nodding, Beatrice tapped her nose a couple times. “Jen isn’t far from here.”

Nose tapping, as if taunting the elder. Brazen. The comparison some people made between Beatrice and Jessy was warranted, to a point.

“Then do not leave her side.” Frowning, Maria walked up to, and past the two of them, a small snarl made for Beatrice before she continued on to the stairway in the back of the Cathedral.

Damien and Beatrice stood there, eyebrows raised, and listened to the sound of opening, and closing gates. After a few of the thuds, clanks, and squeaks of metal on metal, Damien set his butt against one of the pews’ arms, and gestured to the Nosferatu, who did the same.

“I don’t think she likes you,” he said.

“I guess not. I mean, I was a Carthian, and I caused a lot of problems for the Invictus, back in the day.”

“I... don’t think that’s what it is.” It was far more likely that Maria was jealous. Beatrice, a Nosferatu who had once hid in the shadows to hide her disfigurements, now realized they weren’t so bad, and engaged in frequent intercourse, while also finding someone to love. All things, denied to Maria Turio.

Beatrice sat the same way, butt on a pew arm, facing him, the two of them in the aisle. “Yeah, maybe not.”

A downcast look from her said it all: she was strolling through her more painful memories. For a Nosferatu, her disfigurements weren’t all that unappealing. She’d spent all her years lamenting her monstrous features, only to later realize other Kindred didn’t mind them. Worse yet, other Nosferatu often had far worse mutations, and she’d had the audacity to wallow in depression for many years, as her kin did. At least, that was the impression Damien got from her face. Perhaps it was far more simple, like he imagined Jessy’s thoughts to be.

No, Beatrice was a more complex creature than Jessy. Though, complexity did little except bury the mind in pain.

“When’s your date?”

“In an hour.”

“Ah. Looking forward to it?”

“I... am.”

“She’s a spunky little thing, isn’t she?”

“That she is.”

He wouldn’t mind enjoying time with someone less complex, someone who smiled because they meant it, because they couldn’t help themselves.

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~~Julias~~

He didn’t feel comfortable not wearing a suit. He felt less comfortable, wearing a robe. He felt extremely uncomfortable, wearing a thick robe of dark, stained leather, and absolutely nothing underneath.

“Aaron and Othello couldn’t join us tonight,” Triss said, wearing a similar robe. “So I thought, this could be interesting. Sort of a bonding experience.”

“You feel comfortable letting me witness a ritual?” he said.

Jen shook her head, and gestured to the metal bowl in the dirt. “If witnessing was all that was required, I’d be able to do them.”

“You can’t?”

“No.” Jennifer shivered a bit, and spread the blanket out for her to sit down on, legs folded, knees apart. “There’s something in Crúac, about it, that... it’s too brutal, for me to... give into. Maybe when I’m older. But in either case, Jacob doesn’t mind, because you can’t learn to do a ritual by watching it performed.”

Julias nodded, and adjusted his own blanket as he sat down. As much as it felt strange wearing such a heavy robe that looked like it belonged on a necromancer from Jack’s video games, it was roomy, and he had no trouble sitting like Jen, knees apart and ankles crossed. Besides, when in Rome.

The moon sat high in the sky, crescent moon, with clouds peeking across every so often. For the most part, the moonlight came through, and lit the ritual the two witches were performing. The stars were brighter, out in the rocky landscape outside his mansion, about half a mile out into the empty

wilderness. A few dry trees, large rocks, dirt and sand, and the quiet stirring of night animals. Snakes. Rats. He was sure an owl or two were nesting in one of the nearby, larger trees that survived in the dryer climate.

“To learn Crúac rituals is a merciless affair,” Triss said. “I’d never invite you, cause you’d try and stop it.”

“How brutal?” he said. Dumb question.

“To learn my first ritual, I would have died several times over if I were human. This ritual wasn’t nearly so dangerous, but... barbed wire was involved.” Shivering, Triss sat down in front of the large, metal bowl, and held a bag in front of her legs. A leather bag, black, the sort one would hold the head of their kill in, a few hundred years ago. It was squirming, and every so often, it made a very chicken-like squawk.

She reached inside, and yanked out a chicken. This was getting almost cliché.

“Barbed wire and a chicken? Were you put into a chicken coop or something? Animal cruelty to still use barbed wire.”

Triss laughed, but Jen didn’t. His fellow Ventrue groaned and shook her head, hugging herself and clutching her shoulders.

“You cut off your hand with a knife. Try doing it with barbed wire,” Jen said.

“Oh... that is brutal.” Yeah, if he’d seen Triss getting a hand cut off by sawing, with barbed wire, he doubted he’d be able to stop himself from interfering, even if it was her doing it to herself. He was afraid to ask if it was.

Nodding, Triss opened up her robe, exposing the crow skull necklace, her breasts, nipple piercings, the tattoos, and down to her stomach, more tattoos, and navel piercing. Without the Blush of Life, her skin was thinner, pale, and hugged her lean body tight. Still attractive, but considering she was holding a squawking, struggling, angry chicken in her other hand, the last thing on his mind was sex.

She twisted, and ripped the chicken’s head off.

Julias blinked, head jerking away. Blood squirted everywhere, and the dying chicken struggled in Triss’s grip. After a little while, and a little while longer than Julias expected a headless chicken to struggle, the corpse went still. Nodding, Triss chucked the chicken’s head into the old, rusted bowl, while she raised the corpse to her body.

Ok, no wonder they told him to wear one of their robes, and not his suit. Not only was Triss's robe — and his — splattered with bits of chicken blood, but she drew a line of the blood with the chicken's neck across her chest under her collarbone, and then down from her neck, between her breasts, to her stomach.

She handed the chicken corpse to Jennifer, who did the same thing; though Jen made sure to blow Julius a kiss before revealing her body. Maybe he could think about sex, despite the horrific act he was seeing? They had warned him that they, especially Triss, were embracing the whole 'dark, scary witchcraft' scene, full tilt. And, there was something enticing about how twisted, and occult, the act was. It was a dead animal, a sacrifice, and they were drawing symbols on their naked chests with its body and blood; their particularly amazing, naked chests, no less.

Jen handed him the chicken, and he grimaced as he held it by the neck. He'd held dead animals before, plenty of times; you live long enough and it was bound to happen. But this was the first time he'd ever held a headless chicken by the neck. He forced one eye closed, as if by keeping only one eye aware of what he was doing, he'd lessen the impact.

Nothing would lessen the strangeness of him spreading his robe at the chest, turning the chicken on its side, and pressing its headless neck against his sternum. Weird, weird weird, so very weird. But, he had to admit, the thrill was there. This was some dark, scary witchcraft stuff, as promised. Warm blood trickled down over the large girth of his chest, and then down his sternum and flat stomach as he drew the line.

Both Jen and Triss licked a fang as they watched him. Clearly, they were perfectly happy thinking sexual thoughts, comfortable with the act, despite the grossness of what he was doing.

Like a moth to flame, the sight of the two women smiling at him as he painted chicken's blood onto his chest, put a vivid image in his head of what sort of stuff the Circle might have done, in a different time. Orgies around a sacrifice? Someone painting symbols onto bodies, using the blood of their sacrifice, human or animal, while people fucked in a connected circle of carnal acts? He doubted the sexuality was needed, but the excitement and adventure of doing something this dark was undeniable.

Kind of like when the Invictus pushed through a particularly powerful and one-sided business contract; except, less evil.

"Now," Triss said, picking up a large knife from beside the bowl, "each of us puts a drop of blood onto the sacrifice."

“More blood?” Julias said.

Nodding, Triss was the first, and she cut a small mark into her wrist. With some concentration, she forced out a single, heavy drop of her blood, and it landed against the chicken corpse with the weight of mercury. Heavy, thick, and powerful.

“The rituals pretty much always require vitae,” she said. “It’s the connection. It’s the special element that makes Kindred what we are. It lets us communicate with... whatever it is that’s inside us, and whatever it is out there that’s... undefinable.” Smiling at him, a twinkle in her snake eyes, she handed him the knife.

A small spike of pain, and then gone, as he cut open his own wrist enough to force out a large drop of his blood. Jennifer did the same, and set the knife down. All of them kept their robes open, exposing the blood trails they’d painted there. Part of him suspected keeping the robes open, after the fact, was really just to give him the visual feast of their bodies, but he wouldn’t be surprised if it mattered to the ritual, too. It was hard to tell. If the ritual could not be learned through observation, then maybe intent mattered as much as detail.

“Touch the bowl,” Triss said. He put his fingertips on its edge, as did Jennifer. “Close your eyes.” He did. “Now, listen.” Listen, he did.

The world disappeared. The background noise of the desert, the wind, the tiny chirps, the occasional owl hoot, the shifting sand underneath rat tails, all vanished. Everything went deathly quiet, and Julias squeezed his eyes shut to fight against the urge to open them. This was very much not natural, and it felt that way, too. It was like someone had wrapped a thick bag around his head. The unnerving image of him, tied to a chair, with a leather bag over his head, the bag that had previously contained an angry chicken, did not sit well with him.

But he could see something. He raised a brow, but kept his eyes shut as he turned his head around. He could see something, blurry, and red, like a smudgy blob of blood on a glass. A large blob. One was where Triss sat, and another was where Jennifer sat. He leaned left and right, to make sure it was indeed them, and not colors brought on by his shut eyelids.

“I can see you,” he said. Seemed like the thing to say, despite how ridiculous it sounded, said so plainly. “Sort of.”

“Good, it’s working.” Laughing, Triss the red blob nodded; he thought. It was hard to tell what was a movement or just the blob doing blob things.

“You didn’t know if it’d work?” Jen said.

“Nope.”

“What was the worse case scenario if this didn’t work?” He said.

The blob shrugged. “No idea. Maybe your eyes would have exploded?”

“Um, ow?”

“Nah don’t worry. Jacob said rituals either succeed or they don’t. He’s mentioned nothing about a failed ritual backfiring and tearing a face off or anything. That said, some of the rituals he’s described could backfire? I dunno, but they’re not rituals I’d be capable of for decades.”

“We keep our fingers on the bowl?” he said.

“Yeap.”

“And we can see each other with our eyes closed?”

“You can see any paranormal, with your eyes closed. And the range is fucking massive, far as your eyes work normally. Keep your eyes closed, and look around.”

He almost blinked, but shut his eyes tight again, and turned to look toward where he knew the city was. A sea of red blobs. He gasped, despite himself, and stared at the tiny dots, shifting and moving. There were a few hundred of them, but many were so small as to be no more than specs of red dust in his vision, only noticeable against the black and mixed colors of closed eyes. Sea was the wrong descriptor; more like, a black sky of red, gentle stars, gathered around.

He looked around and around, but other than the two blobs of red by him, he could see no other red blobs nearby. All the other red blurs were in the city, except a few seemed to be off to the side. Jacob, and maybe Othello and Aaron. It was far too inaccurate for him to track down actual places though, since all he could see was blobs of red, no buildings or roads or anything.

“This... would be damn useful, if you were trying to see if any paranormals were nearby,” he said. “Might even be able to find the Begotten working with the hunters this way.”

“Yeah.”

Of course, there was one problem. “Gotta sacrifice a chicken every time?”

“A small animal, yeah. Many rituals don’t require a sacrifice, though, as you know.”

Ah yeah, the crow necklace. He didn’t know if she needed it, but when she painted her blood on the door frame of his underground bunker room, there’d been no sacrifice, just her fidgeting with the necklace. Supposedly, the blood would alert her if someone crossed through it, even awaken her from

her daily torpor. A powerful tool, but if she had to lose body parts with barbed wire to learn these rituals, he was happy to never learn them.

“K, open your eyes.” Triss removed her hand from the bowl, and the blobs vanished. Queue for the rest of them to, as well.

Opening his eyes, Julias looked at the bowl with the bird corpse, then up at the moonlight, smirking.

“I still have two secrets to tell,” he said. Witchy witch stuff by moonlight? Perfect time to talk about heavy things.

His fellow Ventrue nodded. “One for me.”

“Got any a bit less painful to share?” Triss said, crawling over to him and snuggling up against his arm. “Hit your wife, hate some of our new friends, and killed a child. How about something less... life-scarring horrible, and something a little more sleepover friendly?”

“Sleepover friendly?”

“Yeah.” Jen crawled over to him as well, though she made sure to take a little time to lean forward, so her breasts swayed and moved underneath her, until she also snuggled against his side. “I’m sure you’ve got some nasty, dark secrets that would make a politician sweat, but maybe something we can laugh about? Got any secrets you don’t want to share, but because they’d be embarrassing?”

He sighed relief, and smirked at the two women beside him. Yeah, he could do that.

“... alright. When I was young, maybe fives years embraced, and was getting more comfortable with being Kindred, I was in a sexual relationship with another Kindred.”

“Surprising,” Triss said. “You told me it’d been forever since you let a Kindred in your bed.”

“Yeah, she was from a long time ago. One of the reasons I fell into that relationship was... I was bad with women, and she was showing me the ropes.” So much for cultivating an air of always being a lady’s man.

Both girls gasped, big and dramatic. He rolled his eyes and shoved both them both away, but they laughed it off and crawled back in.

“Playboy Mire used to be bad with the ladies?” Jen said. “I don’t believe it.”

“Hey, I told you I had a wife, and that ended pretty badly. I didn’t have much of a dating life before her, or after.”

Triss crawled into his lap, literally, and lay on his legs, on her back, head against his sternum and looking up. “Who was this Daeva?”

“It... it was so long ago, it’s a blur. I think her name was Virginia? Barbara?” Sighing, he shook his head and shrugged. What good was immortality if a Kindred’s mind blurred the edges on memories? “I do remember her showing me how to talk to women, be confident, be funny. She also taught me a lot about sex, and the different places to touch a woman.”

“Then I owe her a lot,” Triss said, smiling up at him from below.

“A woman’s body and mind are a mystery,” Jen said, in a very dramatic, matter-of-fact deep voice. Everyone chuckled.

Nodding, he tapped Triss on the nose once, and again on her lips, before he slipped an arm around Jen’s shoulders. “So, I hope that satisfies secret number four.”

“It does.” Jen snuggled into his side, leaned in, and planted a kiss on his neck. As she did, she set a hand on Triss’s chest, and traced the snake tattoo biting one of her nipples. When her finger crossed the drying blood trail, she smiled at Julias, brought the reddened fingertip to her lips, and licked the blood away. “We should—ugh! Oh god that tastes horrible!”