

~~Jack~~

He would have facepalmed, if he wasn't too busy staring at the catastrophe.

If they were Invictus, they'd have been stunned at the sheer audacity of Madam Herrington. To a Carthian, it was an invitation to a fist fight. And Garry looked like he pissed and shit fist fights.

He drew back his fist, and punched his fellow Gangrel in the face. A courtesy punch, maybe, because Jack knew Gangrels didn't use their fists when trying to hurt, they used claws. He'd never seen a Gangrel summon their claws, or use any of their protean abilities, and he didn't want to; Julius's horror stories about the damage McDonald could inflict when pissed was plenty.

Backing up, he reached for his pistol and sword, and kept his hands on their grips, as Jessy flew across the room, slammed into the wall, and fell to the floor. Dislocated jaw. Jack stared on as Jessy got up, grabbed her jaw, and yanked on it. Vitae and elbow grease to get her jaw working again. Fucking god, that was nauseating. She marched toward Garry again, straight toward his pissed off face, before Jack jumped between them.

"Jessy! Come on, stop!"

She didn't appreciate him trying to stop her, but at least she didn't throw him aside. "This fucker is a loose cannon! Hunters on our fucking doorstep, and he's looking to piss off the Invictus."

"You're one to talk." With a snarl, Garry sat back down, and adjusted his jacket. "Like I said, we didn't know Eric was Uratha when Long decided to make it known he wasn't going to take orders from the Invictus anymore."

Jessy kept trying to push past Jack, and he kept pushing her back. Like trying to keep a bull back, but at least she wasn't so stupid as to throw herself at Garry full force again. With a minute to calm down, she backed away, and started pacing, fuming in place. Probably grinding her teeth into powder.

"Like it would have mattered!"

"It would have." Long stood up, came around the desk, and sat against its front edge. "He was just a pawn to be used in a little jab against the Invictus. A deserved jab, might I add."

Eventually, Jack pushed Jessy back toward the door, next to Damien.

This was strange. Garry may have been an asshole, but he didn't normally throw kine lives under the bus; typical Carthian drama, protectors of the people, shit like that. If he was willing to let Long kill kine just to piss off the Invictus, then he was looking to poke the bear, maybe start a fight, or instigate

an outright battle. The timing was atrocious, or perfect, if Garry had some plan the Invictus didn't know about. Likely; Garry was smarter than he appeared.

"This is an awkward situation," Damien said, stepping forward. "We came here to talk to Long, and to make sure he realized Terra Den, and he in particular, were not in a position to challenge Xnomina. But if he is now Kindred, that complicates things."

Complicate indeed. The timing of Long's embrace was odd, and on top of that, Kindred usually groomed a kine before embracing them. So, Long might have known about Kindred well before his embrace, to the point multiple meetings with Xnomina were had with his knowing they were Kindred. It'd be tough to learn when and if Garry told him anything, if he wasn't willing to share. And a punch to the face from Jessy probably shut the door on that idea.

"Long told me," Garry said, shrugging. "That's why I'm here. Making sure you don't hurt my childe."

"Antoinette is ok with this?" Jack said. Maybe he shouldn't have said it, though. Mister Tones threw him a glare, with a tiny smirk to go with it. Yeah, his relationship with Antoinette wasn't going to help him here.

"She is. As per the Prince's law, when she opened the floor to siring again, I talked with her to make sure this was allowed." The bastard licked his teeth, and his smirk grew. "Surprised she didn't tell you, short stuff."

"... did... did you sire this guy, just to know if Antoinette was telling me things that'd help the Invictus?"

"Nah. I sired him because Long is a friend, and he's earned this."

Jack didn't believe him. Much as Garry was a typical Gangrel, aggressive and direct, he was also an elder, and that meant an ability to lie. Dance the Danse.

Damien sighed, shook his head, and tossed a glare back at Montoya before looking to Garry again. "This is ill timed, Mister Tones. We have hunters at our door, and—"

"Shut up, church boy," Garry said. "If it wasn't for the Prince, I'd kill you myself, right now. Lucas's childe? You're nothing but a thorn in my side. And you two?" Garry pointed to Jack and Jessy. "Invictus dogs, nothing more."

Something was off. Something was going on, something not obvious on the surface. Why Garry was pulling this shit, Jack didn't know, but it wasn't for the reasons he was saying. Or maybe it was for those reasons, and Garry was combining two motives.

"I don't believe this." Marching left and right, Jessy kept her glare on Garry and Long, each turn of her body an opportunity for her to posture and growl. "You're messing in Invictus affairs, directly at that, Tones."

"Could say the same about the Mirrden district."

"We don't have time for this!" She threw up her hands, and stomped for the door. "Let's go, boys. This is a matter for the council."

"Speaking of the council," Garry said, eyes hard and glaring, "keep an eye on that Maria bitch, would you? She's messing with shit, and it's going to backfire."

Damien and Jack froze, while Jessy turned around again.

"The fuck you talking about?"

"I'm saying, Maria's fucking with nasty shit. I'm not sure what, I'm not sure how, but she's going to screw up, and bring hellfire on the city." He tapped his nose, and nodded. "A warning."

Frowning, Jessy turned back to the door, and the three of them left. With Jessy a little ahead of them, Jack and Damien looked at each other, and winced. Yet another possible source of the unknown danger looming over the city. Fucking great.

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Isabella's hideout was beautiful, and creepy. The underground cave, the candles, the blatant Victorian clothing, and furnishings Jack was sure he'd seen in Julias's mansion. It wasn't like the underground labyrinth of the Elysium Tower, but it was still damn impressive. It'd have taken many years to carve this hole out of the ground, and more besides to do it underneath the old theater.

"No no no! Passion, my dear boy. Passion!" Isabella's voice. Her arms were around her chest, pressing to her breasts and raising them slightly; on purpose, no doubt. Other vamps were standing around, and watching a male and female vampire in the center of the group, kissing. Guess they were practicing for a play.

Jack smiled as Hella brought him into the main chamber of the cave, and gestured for him to sit in one of the fancy chairs. He did, and took a moment to admire its soft, red cushion, and the wood finishing. How did they sneak shit like this down here?

The girl backed off from her kissing partner. A skinny thing, with long blond hair and pale skin. Cute, and beautiful.

“Vanessa, it may be the boy cannot kiss you passionately, because you keep backing away!” Isabella said, snapping her fingers and motioning for the girl to step back in. Ok, she may have been cute and beautiful, but maybe her acting skills weren’t up to par.

“Or because Jeremy is gay,” she said, scoffing and and folding her arms across her chest. Unlike Isabella, she did it defensively; didn’t like having her acting questioned, apparently. It was enough to earn a chuckle from the crowd, and a scowl from Isabella.

“Irrelevant. We are acting.” Isabella marched up, grabbed Jeremy, and kissed him.

Jack raised a brow, and so did Hella, before the Gangrel laughed. Yeah, Isabella was dedicated to the craft, because god damn. She pulled Jeremy in close, and laid it on him. She was a tall woman, and the ornate arrangement of blond braids she sported were done up in a spiraling crown on her head tonight. Seeing someone like that, with her sharp chin and ice blue eyes, grabbing a man and kissing him, was kind of arousing. The fact both Jeremy and Isabella were gay made it awkward, but getting over that sort of stuff was part of acting, he supposed. It was the similarity between them, and Antoinette and Jack, physically, that was arousing.

Isabella was fucking hot, in a classic Victorian queen fantasy sort of way. Antoinette was a bit taller, and her bust was bigger, but that didn’t change that Isabella was both tall, busty, and lean and curvy with pronounced hips. Wearing a black see-through robe with a full corset and flowing skirt underneath, Jack couldn’t help but let his mind wander. Isabella was gay, and Antoinette was hardly against have women in the bedroom; Ashley and Julee, of course. The idea of Isabella and Antoinette, legs locked, kissing, naked breasts pressing to each other? God damn.

Something about the sight of a busty lady in a corset, being aggressive, that made him want to lie down in her bed and let her do whatever she wanted, and ask her if he could do whatever she wanted. A glance Hella’s way suggested she might have been into the same thing, considering the way she was smiling at Isabella’s aggressiveness. He’d figured Hella was an aggressive type, but then, so too was Isabella. Maybe one of them was different behind closed doors, timid and submissive. Maybe not, and they liked to fight for the top position, heh.

For the love of god, Jack. Get your mind out of the ditch, and onto the task at hand.

“You see?” Isabella said, and stepped back. “Your movements must be exaggerated and pronounced. The audience cannot see the batting of your eyelashes, dear. They will see the bent knee, the pressing of your breasts to his chest, and the gripping of his back with your hands.”

Made sense, like a book cover; useless if the thumbnail wasn't eye catching.

The students resumed their scene. Some more tips from Isabella, mostly about ‘passion’ this and ‘passion’ that, before they broke for the evening. Satisfied, Isabella came over to sit on the edge of her four-poster bed. The luxurious wood sat perfectly level, despite being on the uneven ground of the smoothed cave floor. White sheets this time, pristine white, in contrast — or in defiance — to the dirt of the cave. Then again, it was damn clean, for a cave.

Hella sat beside her, then slid behind her, reached around for her lover's stomach, and undid the robe. Isabella kept it on, but with it opened, she leaned forward a little as she hooked her hands on her knees, one over the other. The angle and corset meant the upper half of her large breasts were on display like melons on a platter. No wonder it was hard to keep his mind out of the gutter.

Hella was beautiful too, in a ‘I'll kick your ass at rugby’ sort of way. Her dark eyes, fit body, and tan skin were gorgeous, and reminded him a lot of Clara. Oh, reminder: go see Clara, and see how things are going with Eric.

“What brings you to my humble abode, Master Terry?” she said. “Or, Mister Terry, I would imagine? A Right Hand has earned his place, after all.”

He squinted at her with one eye, and looked to Hella for a read. The Gangrel smirked, for a second, before she noticed his looking, and wiped it away. The Daeva probably didn't like that he got the promotion then; which made sense, considering she was one of the few ancilla in the city, and was passed up on the promotion for him. Must have bothered her. Hopefully her Invictus loyalty would keep this interaction fruitful.

“Madam Laevion, I had a couple questions for you.”

“By all means, ask. After the damage you did to the hunters who killed Master Tellern, I am more than willing to help.”

Oh, he didn't see that coming. Especially the flirtatious gaze that came after. She was manipulating, exploiting her body and her gaze, and trying to twist him around her finger. Well fuck, she was good at it. Fucking Daeva. But her thanks for his blow against the hunters, a sort of revenge for Barry, must have been legit, considering the original request she'd made, before he was a Right Hand.

“Unfortunately, Barry Tellern’s real killers remain at large; the hunters I managed to catch off guard were only pawns. And the hunters are partly what this visit is about.”

“Yes, of course.” Nodding, she snapped her fingers, and pointed to one of the students. One of the actors from earlier, a woman, still around and chatting with some of the other students, ran up in a jiffy. A very attractive woman, tan skin like Hella, but with softer features and gentler brown eyes. Her hair was black, and came down to her hips as several ponytails with intricate braid work. Definitely Isabella’s childe.

Jack hadn’t seen this girl before, and the beast in him said she was a young Kindred, younger than him. That was damn rare. He knew Antoinette had opened siring, but embracing new Kindred was a largely private affair. Only when they were ready, would a sire bring their new childe to the Invictus council, and only after that, show them to other Kindred.

Jack’s circumstance had been unusual. This girl’s was more normal, he imagined. Normal, and probably filled with sex, considering her sire was a Daeva.

“Miss Danny Florence,” Isabella said. “This is Mister Jack Terry.”

“Hello,” she said, offering a small bow. Dressed in a thin, black dress with blatant Victorian inspiration, like everything else in the room, she squirmed a little as she made eye contact with him. What had Isabella told her to make this new vampire afraid of him? Probably a comparison to Viktor, if he guessed right.

He raised a brow again, at Isabella, as she snapped her fingers, and pointed Danny at a nearby desk against the cave wall. Much as Isabella seemed to adore Victorian everything, she had a laptop on her desk. Power and internet, he was sure, with a wifi router hidden under the bed or something. He struggled to not smile at the thought, as Danny scooped up the laptop, and brought it over to Isabella.

“Your report to the council, about the old woman, was relayed to us. I have seen such a woman, in Devil’s Corner. Or rather, Hella has.” She turned the laptop, and showed him the picture.

Based on the angle, it was taken from a rooftop, similar to the mental images Scully and Mulder had tried to convey to him. A bird’s mind wasn’t a human mind though, and their attempts to convey details were pointless; might as well have been trying to understand colors outside the human viewing spectrum.

There was an old woman in a chair, with a respirator on the wheelchair’s back, and someone was pushing it. A random man with no identifying marks other than that he was wearing a gray hoodie that hid the features. He took a second to scan the hoodie for any brand marks, but there were none; a

typical tactic to avoid being easily recognized. There were a couple other people as well, a man and woman, walking beside the chair. If they'd been talking to the old woman, it'd have looked normal, but they weren't. Looked more like they were standing guard.

The next picture showed them entering an apartment building. Just some random, shitty apartment building in Devil's Corner. But a specific building, with an address and everything. A million times better than anything he had.

"Amazing," he said, and beamed at Hella. "Thanks."

"No problem, kid." With a shrug, Hella set her chin on the woman's shoulder, as she also set her legs to dangle off the bed, around Isabella's. "What's your next move?"

"Not sure. Gonna take this to my sire. Finally got some kind of actionable evidence."

"If she's the woman you're looking for," Isabella said.

"Yeah, true. Think I should send a scout to find out, first?"

The icy woman shrugged. "A question for your sire, Mister Mire. But, a scout would be dangerous. If the scout alerts them to their presence, it could spell doom for said Kindred. Or the hunters will simply flee, and scurry into the cracks of the city like the cockroaches that they are." Again, she snapped her fingers, pointed at Danny, and then pointed at the bed.

Jack raised a brow, and watched Danny sit on the bed's side, and begin to undo her shoes. He glanced around, and noticed the other members of her group were gone. Just him and the three Kindred that, he assumed, shared a bed. Not an assumption anymore, considering Danny was peeking at him over her shoulder, as she started undoing the string-wrap buttons of her shirt.

She looked shy, and timid, just like he must have that first night with Antoinette. And he had to admit, that timid, shy look was a real turn on. If he was a more aggressive fellow, he could see how arousing that'd be, to have someone meek and shy under your touch, helpless to stop you as you make them cum their brains out.

But it was also terrifying to be that person, and he had no reason to make things harder on her. He got up, saved the apartment building's address on his phone, texted it to Damien and Jessy — on delay until he was out of the cave — and nodded to Isabella and Hella.

"I'll bring this up with my partners, and we'll decide from there. Thank you again."

"Oh? You do not wish to watch?" Isabella smirked at him, almost a sneer, and leaned back against Hella. Either they'd rehearsed this, or they rode the same wavelength pretty well, because Hella reached

around her lover's waist, and started undoing the lace of the corset. Each tug of her fingers caused the two large mounds behind its over-bust shape to tremble lightly with the movements, and he had to admit, he stared at them for a second longer than he should have. Maybe two.

“Watch? I uh, I have a girlfriend as you know, and—”

“Watch, not join. The Prince shares a passion for the theatrical display of sexuality, does she not?” Isabella's smirk remained. She wasn't offering to put on a sex show because she wanted to perform. She was offering so she could trap him in a bad situation, break him, manipulate him, like he was nothing more than a sex obsessed teenager. “The Prince enjoyed inviting others to create a sexual spectacle, at the ball. And I admit, it was a terribly enjoyable experience.”

He hesitated again. Not his fault! His penis had a mind of its own, and it was very much wanting to see the three women do things to each other. But he wasn't thirteen anymore. He could control his dick. Mostly.

“Pass, but thank you for the very, very... very tempting offer.” He made a small bow, and turned to leave.

“Mister Terry,” Isabella said, leaning back and setting her head against Hella's neck, as the Gangrel slid off her corset. Breasts. Large, heavy breasts. Jack forced his eyes down and away. God damn it, woman. “Have you been watching the council?”

“Watching the council? You mean—”

“I mean, it is in any Kindred's prerogative to keep an eye on other Kindred, Mister Terry. We are, after all, territorial creatures. And those who have been keeping an open eye and ear, will have no doubt noticed a buzzing noise. Something about the Madam Turio, and a dangerous game she plays?”

What the ever-living fuck. Garry had mentioned that only a fucking hour ago. What the hell.

“Where... did you hear that?” He looked over his shoulder at her, half to hold a dramatic, Ventrue pose, and half to make it easier to not look directly at her naked torso.

“Vicky and Parker, through a friend of a friend of a friend.”

Vicky and Parker. This was getting ridiculous. How many things kept pointing at those two, and now several people pointed at Maria, too. Why Maria? What could she be doing that had everyone so concerned and aware?

“Thanks, for telling me.” Even though it reeked of manipulation.



Jack offered a nod, and gulped as he watched Hella and Danny both begin to kiss Isabella's neck, while caressing and massaging her heavy breasts from behind her.

Yeah, get out now.

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~~Natasha~~

They followed her to the shower, again. She was worried they'd want more sex, and kind of excited they might too, but three orgasms for each boy was enough to keep them satisfied for at least a couple hours. Werewolves were unendingly horny, she realized far too late into this relationship. Art grabbed the soap, Matt grabbed the shampoo, and they got to work pampering her; also, cleaning up their mess, because both wolves had taken it upon themselves to coat her in their cum. Something about being covered in their seed was so dirty, and naughty, and primal, that it tickled something inside her, made her squeal and squirm and give her best doe eyes. And if she gave them those doe eyes right now, as they washed the cum from her skin, they'd probably fuck her again.

But, enough was enough. For now.

"You know Tash," Art said, on a knee in front of her, and one of her legs in his hands as he soaped it, "we don't know much about you."

"You d-don't?"

"Nope." Matt stood behind her, and started working his fingers in her hair with the shampoo. Oh, oh, heavenly. The shower was becoming a frequent place for conversation, considering how often they had to use it, post sex.

"Yeah." Arts hands worked the soap up and down her leg, massaging as much as washing. "Who were your parents? What sort of life did you live before becoming a vampire? That sort of stuff."

"Oh... um, well, Kindred don't usually talk about that kind of stuff, you know? It's like, um... that p-p-part of us died when we were embraced. We're on our second lives n-now, and we... we try and focus on that." Not always successfully.

They nodded, and hmmm'd a few times, in sync with each other.

“All Kindred do that?” Matt said.

“W-We do, as we age. It’s important, b-because if we don’t, those old memories can really... tie us down. We’re n-not like you, alive. Kindred are undead things, and that means we can b-be a b-b-bit static. Old memories can be an anchor, in a b-bad way.” Trying to explain it was difficult. How to get across that Kindred were literally dead things, pretending to be living things, and that it was easy for a dead thing to get trapped by the unchanging state of their minds, was more or less impossible. Torpor changed a Kindred’s mind, not aging; they didn’t age anymore.

“Still hard to believe that you’re older than me. I mean, just look at this thing.” Art set both hands around her vulva, and pulled her apart, earning a squeak from her. “This thing is so damn tiny! And you shave it smooth.”

She pounded both her small fists on his huge shoulders, until the brute stopped opening her entrance like she was a bag of chips!

“You! You... you two should trim some of that hair off. It’s n-normal, in a city like Dolareido, t-to trim off or shave off p-pubic hair.”

The two wolves looked down at their naked bodies, and shrugged. “Sure,” they said.

Well, that was easy.

“You don’t... d-don’t have to wax it, or anything.”

“Good fucking god!” Matt jumped back, and hit his back against the wall of the shower. Big tub, big shower, but not enough for the man. “I didn’t even consider that!”

Giggling, she turned around, and pat the big guy on his stomach. “Relax! I s-said you d-d-don’t have to. Just shave, or trim.” Matt was a typical mountain man, big and gruff, lots of body hair. It looked good on him, but she spent her first and second life in Dolareido. In such cities, fashion was always on the mind, and quick to adopt the newest fads. Maybe some day, it’d be with plenty of hair again, but for a good twenty years now, it was to go hairless.

Easy for her to do. She shaved her body down once, and simply didn’t regrow it unless she wanted to. Laughing, she thought of Art and Matt shaving themselves down, only to regrow all their hair in a puff of comedic smoke.

With her back turned to Art, she should have predicted the man would take advantage. She squeaked, and tried to turn around, but he didn’t let her, one hand gripping her hip while the other soaped up her butt. Ah well, it needed to be cleaned anyway.

“Prince tell you about the new Uratha in town?” Art said.

“Um, only a little. Eric, r-right?” Jessy and Tash had both seen him, talked to him, but before they knew he was a werewolf.

“Yeah.” Matt set his hands on her head, and continued shampooing her hair, from the front this time. “We haven’t see him yet. Avery’s description is he’s a black dude, average height, shaved head, clean shaven.” His smile was so warm, and she returned it as she took a loofa, and started lathering his body too. Like washing steel.

Right. Nodding, she reached up, and washed the man’s shoulders as best she could from so far below. “W-Works at Bloodlust.”

“We should pay him a visit,” Art said. “But, Clara said he’s not too interested in us.”

“He doesn’t want to learn ab-bout... who he is?”

Matt shook his head, and turned her around to begin washing her back. “When you first change, you get some memories bestowed on you, from Luna.”

A cough drew both their eyes down to Art. “Just because the transformation gives us memories, doesn’t mean it came from the moon.” Apparently, he didn’t agree.

“Luna is more than the moon.” Matt’s grip on Tash’s back got a little harder. Not uncomfortable, but awkward.

“Says you.”

“Come on, Art. David spoke to the spirits. They said come here. Avery herself said the visions—”

“You ever had a vision, Matt?”

“No, but—”

“How many times we have to have this discussion? We have no proof, just someone’s word.”

“You sound like Noah. You don’t trust Avery?”

“That’s not what I said.”

If Natasha could shrink her tiny body more than it already was naturally, she would. Art and Matt were joined-at-the-hip friends, and to hear them start arguing was very strange. Stranger, because they were all naked, and she was standing between them, getting washed.

She looked up over her shoulder at Matt. He wasn't the same as Art. Art was a skeptic, and Matt was not. Tash was a skeptic, but that didn't mean she didn't appreciate the power of someone's commitment to someone else.

And then there was Matt's past. He lost his family. Part of her wanted to ask for more details about that, but then she avoided the issue when they asked about her previous life; quite the little hypocrite she was. She could talk about her parents, if she could dig up the memories, if she could find the strength to wade through that shithole.

"Let's... g-go see Eric," she said. Redirecting their energy toward something more productive should hopefully be a good idea. Look at her, being a mom.

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Eric did not want to be seen, not by Matt and Art anyway. One glance their way and the young Uratha scowled. He was a good scowler; maybe he practiced it, for his old fighting job. It was enough to give Tash pause, for sure. Matt and Art nudged her forward, and she gulped as she came in closer to the man. He was up on the second floor by the stairs, one elbow on the railing, and looking down at the small crowd below. So much more intimidating than that time she'd caught Jessy fucking him in a booth; his first change must have changed him in ways she could never fathom.

She managed a small smile at him. He looked great in a suit, but reeked of the sort of man who hated suits. A shame, Antoinette would say.

"Hello Eric," she said. "This is Art-turo, and Matthew."

"I suppose you're with Avery." Venom dripped from his words. Something must have pissed him off, and it had to be related to Avery. Weird, considering Avery should be helping the man. But Art and Matt said he wasn't interested; still, she was hoping that was exaggeration. Apparently not.

Art raised a hand in a small wave. "Ni-zu tag," he said. Tash raised a brow. Whatever he said, it was enough to make Eric snort, and set his gaze back to the crowd underneath them. "Knew you'd be an asshole."

Natasha facepalmed. Ok, if Avery acted like that with Eric on their first meet, she couldn't blame the bouncer for being annoyed.

But Art's words managed to pull a small smile from Eric, before he turned to face them full on, one elbow on the railing.

"Seems to be a common attribute among our kind."

Matt, behind Art, pat his friend on the shoulders, both hands. "I take offense to that. Not all of us are like Noah or Avery, or this asshole right here."

Art elbowed Matt in the gut, hard enough to earn a grunt and backstep from him, before Art stepped around Eric and came to the railing as well. "Avery says she gets the impression you want to be a ghost wolf."

"Ghost wolf?"

"Yeah." Matt came in as well, but he made sure to put Tash between him and Eric, by the railing. Nice of him, to include her; or he was trying to keep some distance from the mean man. "Means you don't bother with the joining a pack and being a part of the great hunt."

"Not actively, at least," Art said.

"Then, yeah, I guess that describes me pretty well." Eric shrugged, and glanced up at both Art and Matt. Much as Tash could tell Eric was a strong, deadly fellow, Art was a tall guy, and Matt was a giant. He looked small, in comparison. "Got no interest in your pack, or whatever."

Smirking, Art looked down at the crowd. "You don't want a piece of the pack, I get that. But Siskur-Dah is in your blood now. It'll come to you, or you'll go to it. Unavoidable."

"Says you."

"It's true," Matt said. "You act like Avery came to you trying to recruit you, military style. Not true... mostly. She's throwing you a life jacket, because like it or not, this shit's going to show up on your doorstep from now on."

"I can swim fine on my own."

This Eric man was obstinate. Tash smiled, and tried to hide it by looking down at the dancing crowd. No wonder Jessy liked him. The girl didn't normally deal with tough assholes on such terms, and Eric must have been a breath of fresh air for her. Or rather, a unique taste of blood. And the blood was most definitely a plus.

She licked her lips, and glanced up at Matt beside her. To sink her teeth into the massive meat of his neck, and let the ambrosia flow into her mouth, was scary addictive. Tasted so damn good. And

Jessy seemed to be a bit attached to this man, so, the blood might have had something to do with that. Or it was his asshole behavior. Both, definitely both.

“They’re only trying t... t-to help,” she said.

“No one helps for no reason. And Avery already extended the offer to join her pack; though I could tell she meant as a rock under her foot.”

She raised a brow. “A rock?”

“Yeah. She didn’t actually want me in the pack, just under her thumb.”

“Can you blame her?” Shrugging, Art turned to face the man. “We don’t know you.”

“But,” Matt said, “we’d like to. You’re Uratha now, and that warrants learning who you are.”

“... just a guy who wants to be left alone.”

Art laughed again. “Well, ghost wolf, you may want to be left alone, but you’re in the shit now. You’ll see them everywhere; maybe not like David, but you’ll see them. You’ll smell them, notice them, and when push comes to shove, you’ll feel the drive to hunt them down and fix the shit they fuck up.”

Matt nodded. “Father Wolf’s duty.”

“I have no interest in any ancient being’s duty.”

In any other circumstance, Tash would have watched and said nothing, let the people talk, argue their own stuff, stuff she had no business getting her nose into. She knew nothing about spirits, or Father Wolf, after all. But, things were different now, now that she was a member of the Ordo Dracul; not a real member, not yet, but serving one nonetheless. This sort of stuff was becoming her business, like it or not.

“What w-will you do then?” she said. “M-Matt and Art are sure that things will... w-will happen, whether you want them to or not. And—”

“And they can all fuck right the hell off.” Eric put his hands into his pockets, and headed toward the stairs. A glance up at Matt was enough to make the giant move out of the way, so the man could continue on his way. No look back, no glance, no invitation to follow him, nothing. One moment there, next moment gone.

He was a mean guy.

“... I... guess that was a b-bad idea.”

Matt shrugged. “Nah, that was fine. Some new wolves just take time to acclimate, and from what Avery tells me, this dude had a rough first change. Not the roughest, but rough none the less. I imagine it was rough for you, becoming a vamp, right?”

“It... it was.”

Art headed over to an open booth, and the three of them sat down, her in the center. It was nice, with them around her, hiding her and protecting her from the annoying world of Bloodlust. Had a safe feeling.

A safe feeling. Been a long time since she had a feeling like that, to feel safe with other people, especially boys. It was strange, and, welcome.

She frowned, leaned forward toward the booth table, and set her hands on it as fists. “I t-told you that... that Kindred don’t like t-talk about their past much, from when they were still alive.”

“Yeah,” Art said, “but I mean, you can leave it like that. You don’t have to say anything.”

Sighing, she shook her head. “It’s ok. I learned ab-b-bout you, Art.” The man had had a rough childhood, growing up alone in Tijuana. “And Matt, Jacob... that m-must have been horrible.” And the gentle giant lived in perpetual sadness over the death of his family, that he did not get to witness. She knew things about them, and now, maybe she felt safe enough to return the favor.

“D-D... Daniel,” she said, “he turned me. Embraced me. It was a... w-weird... moment. I was offered a cursed immortality, and he warned me... w-warned me that it’d be hard, and horrible, and that I’d have to leave m-my parents behind. I was young.” And she would forever look young because of it. “B-But, I didn’t realize... how bad it would be, leaving them. Or how bad it would be... w-when parents think... their child has died.” Her fists melted into flat hands, before she sank back into the booth, and hugged herself. “Mom got sick. It w-wasn’t long before she... d-died. And D-Dad, he... he killed himself, not long after.”

Both wolves stared at her, then each other, then her again, before they too sank into the booth.

“Heavy shit,” Art said.

“Yeah.” Nodding, Matt reached out, and slid an arm around her shoulders. She didn’t fight him. Normally, she’d very much want to be alone, thinking these sorts of thoughts, but she’d opened this door, this gate, and Art and Matt were looking on through it. They were stepping through it.

Art set his hand on her thigh, and gave it a light pat. “How are your memories? Not sure if that’s offensive to ask; I know Kindred and their memories can be shaky.”

“I haven’t t-taken a long torpor.” Not that the nightly torpor of vampire sleep wasn’t enough to twist memories with scary dreams, but a proper torpor, to let the blood lust settle, was not something she expected to deal with for many decades yet. Thankfully. “I can... I was there for... my mom’s funeral. And then later, my d-dad’s...”

Both men winced. Yeah, no more words needed on that. And judging from the reaction, they had gone through similar. Matt must have had to go through a funeral for his family, and judging from what he said before, she wouldn’t be surprised if there’d been no body to bury. And Art, she was afraid to ask for details on his situation; troubled childhood and forced to live alone could mean anything.

Maybe she’d ask for more, later, but—

“Wow, who died?” Jessy came up over the stairs, and walked over to them, head tilted to the side. The three of them glared at her. She threw up her hands, palms forward. “Whoa, sorry for asking.”

Tash shook her head, and let her eyes relax. Not Jessy’s fault, and her brutal personality was a nice change of pace from Tash’s inner monologue. And while she was a very forward woman, she didn’t have any of Eric’s bitterness. Maybe it’d be good if she rubbed off on him.

“It’s ok,” she said. “Um, just...”

“Heavy stuff,” Art said.

“Uh huh?” Shrugging, Jessy slid into the booth, and got cozy up beside Matthew. “You really are gigantic, you know that? Tash, you have to let me have a taste.”

“W-What? No! You have Eric, g-g-go find him. He was here moments ago.”

“Was he? Shit, I missed him. He was supposed to be working, but... but you fuckers drove him off, didn’t you?” And, like she’d known Matt for decades, she punched him in the arm.

He returned it, and grinned. Buddy punches were a language he could understand.

“We didn’t drive him off,” Art said. “I mean... I suppose we did. We’re just trying to help him out, make a choice, get him into the fold before he gets buried in shit. He’s Uratha now, and he’s not going to be able to ignore all instincts, the signs, the everything.”

Jessy shrugged. “He’s his own man, let him do what he wants.”

Art raised a brow. “Let him do what he wants? Don’t you have him under your thumb? Paying his salary, putting a roof over his head, and let’s not forget, threatening to kill him if he breaks your Masquerade?”



Uh oh.

The Gangrel didn't like that. She leaned forward, one elbow on the table, and sneered at Art. "Our Masquerade, asshole. Don't think just because we do a better job keeping the Masquerade safe, that it doesn't also protect you. And besides, we were going to keep things the way they were with Eric because it's a mutually beneficial relationship."

"As long as he doesn't go into a Death Rage at an inconvenient time." Sighing, Art shook his head some more, and waved his hand through the air. Dismissing. Jessy would not like that, either.

"We can handle it," she said, growling.

Tash gulped, and reached out toward Jessy to tap her hand. "Um, they're... they're v-very... d-d-dangerous when... when they do that." Not that they were beyond recovery. She'd managed to break through to Art and Matt, but it was a close call.

Jessy shrugged, and mirrored Art's dismissing wave. "You telling me your two boys here never go wolfy on you, maybe during a good fuck?"

"J-Jessy! I'm not... n-not into bestiality!"

"Of fucking course not. I don't mean fucking when they're wolves, but when they're in their big transformed mode, you know?" Jessy leaned back in her seat, and let her eyes drift upward as a goofy smile sneaked onto her lips. "I want to see you fuckers in that form. Must be wicked awesome."

Matt and Art raised a brow at each other, looked down at Tash, then Jessy, then around again, before Matt finally spoke up. "The Gauru form is dangerous, Jessy. Very. If we don't struggle to keep control, it can lead into a Death Rage."

"Yeah," Art said. "It's a fine wire to walk."

"But can you fuck in that state?" The stupid Gangrel woman shivered, and winked at Tash. "You guys get like, nine-feet tall, right? Human wolf hybrid monster things? Towering behemoths of muscle and raw power? Sexy as all fuck?"

Matt choked on a cough, while Art continued to raise a brow. There was no talking sense into Jessy. Tash knew that, and now so did her boyfriends.

"That doesn't mean we couldn't use Dalu," Art said at least, and he grinned Tash's way. "Bigger, stronger body, more muscle, but not werewolf mode."

Werewolf mode? Ugh, these boys were regressing down to Jessy's way of talking. Tash would not allow that!

“If y-you want t-t-to experiment, go find Eric, and ask him! I d-don’t... do... that.” She glanced Matt and Art’s way, and shrank into her booth a little. Now the image was in all their heads. Dalu mode, she hadn’t seen, but it sounded like a bigger, stronger person. Gauru mode, she’d seen too many times, and the idea of having sex with one of those titans of steel was scary.

Scary, and thrilling. Tash was the one who’d told Jessy she thought their Gauru form was a towering behemoth of muscle and raw power, and maybe she said it with a little more smiling and shivering than she meant to. Jessy interpreted that as her thinking they were sexy, evidently. And, well, they were kind of sexy, in a ‘oh god it’s going to eat me’ sort of way. Was that sexy? Maybe it was, a little. The idea of those enormous beasts pinning her down, tearing her clothes off, and... and... doing things to her? Would they even be able to fit inside her?

If she’d been blushing life, she’d be blushing beet red.

“K well, I’m gonna go look for Eric, see if he’s willing to give it a go.”

Art rolled his eyes, and threw up his hands in small surrender. Yeah, there was no talking to Jessy.

“Ok, well,” Matt said, “far be it from me to tell you how to live your life, or enjoy your sex life, but you’re poking at a dangerous place, Jessy. Gauru is sacred, and... yeah, dangerous.” Poor man couldn’t find a better word for dangerous, and it wouldn’t have mattered if he did. Jessy’s mind was set.

“Good to know.” Jessy hopped out of the booth, and went hunting for her target.

“That girl is peculiar,” Art said.

“You’re t-telling me.”

“I mean, she really knows what she wants, doesn’t she?”

“... I d-dunno.” Tash shook her head, leaned forward, and set her elbows on the table, so she could rest her chin in her palms. “I think she... she m-might want something a little more romantic. Rough! She likes rough, b-but... I think maybe she’s...” Maybe she’s a little more like Tash than Jessy figured. Maybe she’d like a little romance too.

And of course, Tash was more like Jessy than she’d ever thought.

Her phone rang. Jack’s ring. “Hello? Jack?”

“Hey Tash. We’re having a bit of a get-together at the Bloodlust later this evening, talk about the hunters and stuff, you in?”

“Uh, s-sure. I’m already here.”

“Sounds good. Triss and Jen and Damien will be there. Fiona too, but she’s not answering her phone; probably underground. And Antoinette’s coming.”

“The P-Prince is coming? Um... that’s... s-sure, ok.” This was going to be a weird meeting.

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~~Eric~~

He didn’t want to do this song and dance. He didn’t want to hunt spirits. He didn’t want to deal with any of this ridiculous crap.

Go home? No, Avery knew where he lived, and Clara and Carter were there already. He wanted to see his cat, but Kat would be safe there without him for a day. A day was all he needed, a day to clear his head. A day thinking about what Athalia told him.

Drifting through the dark streets of Dolareido, he let his wandering soul guide him between the grand buildings of sin. Once he was deep in an alley, he set his back to a wall, and looked up. Sun would be rising soon. Sleeping during the day was fucking weird, or at least it should have been, but wolves seemed perfectly capable of hunting at night; preferred it, even. He could feel that, sense it, feel the tips of every hair on his body tell him that night time was the better time to be up and doing things. Day time? Pointless. Prey hid during the day, slept, and other predators took the same queue.

Daytime was for the humans. For him and the other freaks, nighttime was the new life. It made visiting his dad a little problematic, but his new body seemed fine running on less sleep when he needed it to.

He smiled, and looked at the moon. His new body was fucking great. The new thorns in his side, not so much. But at least the thought of being forced to hunt things didn’t make him want to gag, like driving a cab did.

Hunting. Hunting spirits. How the fuck did that work? What the fuck was a spirit? All he had were strange memories and knowledge that didn’t belong to him, climbing up through the gravel of his brain, and showing him images of things. ‘Things’ was as good a descriptor as he could give, because it was everything and anything. Spirits? Hithim, his new memories told him. And the hithimu and hithisu.

They were things he was supposed to deal with, and he had no fucking clue how to do that, other than to kill it. Kill it with fang and claw and strength.

The Meninna preferred to hunt shartha. That's what Avery was doing in Dolareido, finding a home for her pack, and dealing with the shartha. The word itself sent ice up his spine, and he looked down from the moon to the asphalt. Cigarette butts. Those he understood. Spirits and ancient host creatures, that he was supposed to somehow hunt? That he didn't understand. He wasn't sure he wanted to understand.

“Why me?”

“Why you indeed.”

Eric jumped, and spun around. Someone had snuck up on him? He doubted anyone could sneak up on him, with his new senses to protect him.

“Who is this one?” the voice said.

“New. New Uratha.”

“New. Weak.”

“Weak and open.”

“Open to us!”

Movement caught his eye, and yanked it to the wall. The shadow was billowing, as if it could catch a breeze. Curves, cresting against the light like collapsing waves, the black reached out across the asphalt around him, and licked at the space beneath his feet.

Slowly, with all the haste of the ocean tide, eyes began to form in the shadows around him. White eyes. They glowed, casting subtle whites around him and sending fresh shadows out into the blackness of the alleyway.

“Fuck you.” Ok, spirits. Spirits were coming for him, like Avery said they might. The fuck sort of spirits were hanging out in shadows?

Shadow spirits. Literal spirits of darkness, probably with no other desire than to turn off lights.

No, it was more specific than that. A simple shadow spirit wouldn't do this, behave like this. These things reached out for him from the walls, from the cracks of black around dumpsters and building corners, from around old crates, from around broken bottles where the light was cast aside by

the curving glass. They weren't simply shadow spirits, they were spirits of dark alleys, of hiding places, of the cracks in a city where the filth and sin welled up like pus around the scabs of a wound.

He knew that. Why did he know that? How? Memories, understanding, kernels of knowledge swimming in the gray matter of his brain, and rising to the surface. And cravings along with it. He wanted to sink his teeth into these spirits, tear them apart, rip them open and devour their essence. They needed to be thinned, before their rampant desires turned this whole district into nothing more than a shadowy corner where people could get lost in the worst humanity had to offer.

He ran. The eyes stayed in the dark, and they called out to him. Open to them. Let them in. He belonged in the dark.

He supposed, if it wasn't for all the other shit being dumped on him, white eyes in the darkness would have scared him; they did a little. But compared to all the other shit he'd seen in the past month, some white eyes looking at him from shadows was rather tame. Didn't change that he didn't want to be near that, anywhere near that. Stay the fuck away from him. Just leave him alone and let him do his own thing.

Breathe, just breathe. Luna's advice? He didn't understand. How the fuck was he supposed to understand that?

He adjusted his suit jacket, and made off toward nowhere.

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~~Antoinette~~

Antoinette sighed as she watched the squabbles of her Primogen. Garry's choice of childe was going to cause problems, but she knew the man had been speaking with Jeremy Long on several occasions, and more besides, over the past few months before the embrace. There had undoubtedly been months before that, where the man was meeting with Long as well. Either way, his request was reasonable, despite her knowing full well it would lead to issues with the Xnomina.

The Invictus council did not agree. They leaned over her beautiful glass table, and barked at the Carthian leader. He returned their barks with his own. Bark. Bark bark. Woof. If she did not know better, she would have assumed she was in a room filled with Uratha, howling their complaints.

Why did she pursue this life, this role as Prince? Perhaps she had a martyr complex, and felt it her duty to bear the sins of her race. She did want to fix her species, prevent their self destruction. Truly, she did. But sometimes, only sometimes, she wondered what it would be like to abandon all responsibilities, and simply exist. Would it be so bad? No one was strong enough to challenge her, harm her. There was nothing and no one who could threaten her if she wanted to abandon this foolish crusade, and simply enjoy her second life.

She leaned back in her chair, and combed her hair over her shoulder as she let her mind wander. A terrible sin, not paying attention in her own meetings. But, at the moment, she was overpowered with the need to fantasize.

She could take Jack, and disappear into another city. Fresh people, fresh faces. There would be dangers, but she was confident she could handle them all. She and her lover would hide deep beneath the earth during the day, and come nightfall, they would do whatever whim came upon the gentle night breeze. Enslave several kine, and enjoy an orgy? A regular indulgence, to be sure. Ashley and Julee would come, of course; she was Daeva, and no self-respecting Daeva feasted upon random kine when they had devoted ghouls, whose blood they were already familiar with.

But then, perhaps she could embrace Ashley and Julee, turn them, welcome them as Kindred, and release them from her bind. They would be free to find men and women to seduce and devour to their heart's content. Other Kindred were not to touch her little Ventrue, but that did not mean they would not be welcome to visit. It would be fun, for Ashley and Julee, Kindred in their own right, to engage in their own sexual hedonism, with Antoinette and Jack watching. She could hold her Ventrue in her lap, facing the orgy before them, and softly massage his cock in her hands as his head rested between her breasts. And before them, Ashley and Julee could be surrounded by a dozen kine, all men, and each could bury her in white fluid, after pounding them into a slew of wet orgasms.

And once the sexual delights were done, Jack and Antoinette could move on, and worry for nothing but tomorrow night. Perhaps they could move to a different city? Dangerous for Kindred to go anywhere without protection from the sun, but she was strong enough to dig deep holes in the earth in an emergency. But holes could be found, and the two of them would be helpless if caught in torpor.

Reality shattered her dreams with a hammer of cold steel. Yes, there were realities that elder Kindred could not ignore. Risk-taking was how you died, and elders became elders by digging into whatever locale they chose. Drifting was not an option. If she moved to another city, it would be to live, not drift. But then, that did not mean she would have to become Prince once more. She could simply exist, live her unlife, and do nothing but engage in carnal delights with Jack until they were sore from

the effort. Until they would be inevitably dragged into the squabbles of the local Kindred, or perhaps other paranormals, or even accursed mages and their insane pursuits.

And for all her fantasizing, she could not abandon the Ordo Dracul. The need to find truth and prepare for the future, were deep-seeded needs in her soul, and no amount of running would silence those inner demands.

“You can’t expect us to let this pass,” Michael MacDonald said. Such a loud man, with none of Viktor’s control.

Hell must have frozen over, for her to miss Viktor Honors.

“You have no say in who I sire.” Garry leaned forward, set his elbows and hands on the table, and offered something between a grin and sneer at the opposing Gangrel. Bark bark. “Only the Prince can deny me that right.”

“Did she know it was Mister Long you were grooming?” Maria said.

Spoken about in third person. Antoinette did not appreciate that. She sat up straighter in her chair, and glared at the rotting Nosferatu.

“I did.”

“I can’t believe this.” Julias stirred in his seat, as if sitting upon fire. “This timing could not be worse, Tones. We don’t need to be squabbling, when we have hunters in the city.” If this were an Invictus meeting, he would be pacing about, she was sure, and bestowing commandments from on high, as Ventrue were prone to do. But this was her meeting, her domain, and he was forced to temper his reflexes. Good.

“I do not need to justify my allowance for his choice,” she said. “But, in the pursuit of peace, know that Garry has been grooming Long for months. Have you not, Mister Tones?”

“Yeah. Known him for a while, and we’ve been working together on things for some time. He did me a solid, so I did him one and turned him into a ghoul. Things progressed smoothly, and he earned the right to be Kindred.” The subtle grin tainted his words. He knew Xnomina and Terra Den did not cooperate, and Long’s economic power in contesting Xnomina was icing for Garry’s choice. Of course, once the man was a ghoul, Garry’s manipulation of Long was complete; ghouls followed the orders of their masters with the utmost loyalty, after all. Embracing the man was a defensive maneuver, so the Invictus could not challenge Long directly without challenging the Carthians indirectly.

Killing another covenant's ghoul was a terrible thing, but would not warrant war. Killing a member of a covenant, on the other hand, did. Bitter memories.

"Garry's strange choice of friends," Jacob said, finally joining the conversation, "is irrelevant. What matters more, is the unusual circumstance his game has brought to life. Eric Tanverson is Uratha." The eyeless monster leaned back in his chair, and ground his teeth until Antoinette could hear the enamel tear away. "Another fucking wolf in our city."

"That is a strange circumstance," Garry said. "Long's games against Xnomina were only in the typical kine context. He had no idea about Eric."

Julias nodded. "None of us did. Except for Fiona, probably."

"Yes," Maria said. "Begotten can see far more than we expected, if they can tell an Uratha is Uratha before even they do."

Fiona. If Jack's request to the others went as planned, Antoinette would spend a couple hours at Bloodlust with her lover, and his friends, Fiona included. And perhaps Eric would be working tonight as well. The silly drama and interactions of the masses were not her concern, and yet, such silliness was where much of life's joys were to be found. It might be good for her, to take a step back from her role for a couple hours, and simply watch others talk. Jack had said they were to talk of the hunters as well; a conversation worth hearing.

"Mister Tones," she said, "see that Mister Long does not cause chaos for the Invictus. Terra Den and Xnomina are, of course, up to the management of their respective leaders, but any struggle between the Carthians and Invictus is to be done without the death of Kindred. The hunters are the primary concern. Do I make myself clear?" She met the Gangrel's eyes, and stared into his depths, like slicing open his ribcage with a scalpel to expose his heart.

"Of course." He met her gaze for a few seconds before looking away. Like with a dog, holding eye contact was a sign of aggression, and to hold it longer, a sign of dominance. She won, as she always did.

"Azamel," Julias said, "gave us some info that we've been looking into, as you know. The old woman that might have performed the ritual. We'll be investigating a possible sighting and location, in Devil's Corner."

"Get Avery under your thumb yet?" Garry said. "She might help if you ask."

Julias sneered at the man. To see the Primogen meetings damage his patience was sad, but Antoinette said nothing. Not the time.



The meeting continued. Garry complained about the Mirrden district takeover by Xnomina. The Invictus council complained about Long and his sudden inclusion in the Danse Macabre. Jacob complained about another Uratha, though at least Jacob's complaints were half in jest, as if to mock the others for their petty annoyances. Julias pushed for more awareness and aggression in dealing with the hunters, while the others cautioned patience, and to let Azamel handle her own problems.

A tug of war of topics, that led nowhere. Such was unlife. She looked forward to, what would hopefully be, a more enjoyable conversation later tonight.

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Bloodlust. In the past, she would come here with Ashley and Julee, and watch the world unfold. Her frequent visits to the night lounge were a part of her game to pit Viktor and Tony against each other, oh so long ago. Without such a reason, she rarely came here; that was more due to her need to deal with present circumstances, however. A friendly, innocent visit would be a welcome change.

Jack should already be here, waiting for her, with Beatrice, Jennifer, and Fiona. Others were likely to come, she was sure, such as Athalia, or perhaps Jessy. She had also messaged sweet Natasha about the meeting, only to discover she was already there, waiting.

What was the Prince doing, wasting her precious time on as pointless an endeavor as 'hanging out'? It was not pointless, as she knew. Despite the overwhelming need to work, work, and continue working, it was a road to self destruction. One had to take time to enjoy the simple things in life, such as a conversation with acquaintances, or there was little point in living.

And, the visit was not without other merits. Assessing the situation of those involved, and what they knew of the hunters, was valuable. Was Beatrice making progress with Jacob. Was Fiona a sweet, innocent little creature, or a master manipulator. Was Jennifer pursuing sexuality with the same intellectual standpoint as Antoinette; a potential ally, that one, if Jacob had not recruited her first.

She stepped into the night lounge masquerading as a club, and smiled at the kine that looked her way. Oh yes, she was a beautiful woman, she knew it, they knew it, and there was a game to be played when people made eye contact, under such a circumstance. Flirting with the eyes, saying things without saying them. 'If you served me, I would make your nights filled with bliss beyond imagining. Too bad.' Things of that sort.

She was a very tall woman, and that was intimidating for many, especially when combined with her long white hair. Kindred, Uratha, and Begotten cared little for the shape of the body when assessing threat, but kine were dominated by such measurements. She was a tower, and a deadly looking one at that, to the simple, living creatures indulging in her city. If only they knew she owned their lives. The thought put a smile on her lips, and she shared it with the kine as she walked past them, toward one of the stairways on the side of the dance floor.

She had decided to wear one of her dresses meant for a nightclub. It left little to the imagination, with its long, black curves covering only one of her legs, down to the ankle, while leaving the other leg exposed up to the high hip. No underwear of course, and anyone fortuitous enough for a convenient viewing angle would see her sex; fashion, in the new world. The dress's chest was barely more than a sliver of fabric for each breast, wide enough to cover her nipples, and rise to hook behind her neck. It left much of her bust exposed, especially as the chest straps reached down to her stomach, with plenty of room for her breasts to sway with her movements against the small slivers of fabric. And, of course, the dress was open back, to complete the illusion of nudity.

People stared as she walked past. They knew her, here, despite many months between visits. It was a blessing and a curse, having distinct features. If she continued visiting for years yet, she would eventually have to stop, for decades, before the story of the white haired woman passed. It had happened before, and it would happen again; unusually tall with white hair made her hard to forget, and dark amber, almost red eyes, made it impossible. And if the story included the 'unaging' descriptor, it would attract unwanted attention.

But it would be many years before she would have to take such actions with Bloodlust. Perhaps she should visit more often, and enjoy its carefree, sinful nature with Jack and her ghouls.

She made her way up the stairs, and scanned the booths. The red light did little to expose the hidden faces in the darkness, but the light pulsed white with the beat of the bass-heavy music, visual flare to the heartbeat of the club, and exposed the people hiding on the second floor.

Two of whom, she recognized as Jessy Herrington's ghouls. Each had a kine woman in their booth, and were kissing them. Jessy herself was a sexually open-minded person, and Antoinette appreciated that, but letting her ghouls sleep with random strangers seemed crass. Then again, Jessy was Gangrel, and Antoinette would never be able to understand how those brutes thought.

Jessy though, was nowhere to be seen.

Jack was in the back, with Beatrice and Jennifer, and Jack raised a hand to offer a finger wave. Adorable. They had chosen the larger booth, center and back, to make room for the other guests.

Damien, she was not happy to see, but she could understand his presence. And the man was quite attractive, especially when wearing some business casual clothing, his suit jacket undone, and no tie. Natasha was there as well, and so too was Arturo and Matthew.

This would be Antoinette's first time speaking with the Uratha without Avery's presence. A potentially disastrous situation, but if Vola felt comfortable bringing her boyfriends to the meeting, then she must have felt comfortable with their interaction with her. Time to test those waters; with Jack's presence of course, in case she needed his skills as intermediary.

The two wolves were dressed in dark jeans, with Matt in a white shirt, Art in black. The two beasts were built from steel, and had no need for a jacket's fake shoulders to emphasize their builds. They came with plenty of emphasis. They were massive examples of male strength, testosterone, and mass. Antoinette could not help but smile at the thought of little Vola, trapped between the two enormous men, and struggling to hold on as they fucked her at the same time. Delightful.

Beatrice was in jeans as well, and a cropped tank top, black, that hugged her chest tight enough for everyone to notice she had pierced nipples. The girl was far more into her looks than she realized; Julias knew it, Antoinette knew it, and she was probably coming to learn it, too. Jennifer, Beatrice's opposite, wore her love of beauty and fashion on her sleeve, and tonight, she was wearing something meant to catch eyes. All the eyes, apparently. Antoinette could not see her skirt from the angle, but she was wearing a tube top, white, that also had sleeves; a pleasant contrast to its exposing nature. The tube top itself was nothing more than a thin strip, tiny enough that it would have been scandalous on a beach, let alone in a night club. The woman should have been Daeva. Jack, of course, was dressed as any self-respecting Invictus Ventrue would: the full suit ensemble. A two-button single-breasted jacket, gray, with a tie to match. At least it was a casual suit, with notch lapels and fitted silhouette.

People started to shift out of the booth, no doubt to greet her properly, but she shook her head, and motioned only for Arturo, Matthew, and Natasha to step out. They caught on quickly, and slid out, so she could slide in there place, and take the center of the booth.

As much as tonight was about relaxing, it was also about official business. And in either circumstance, she would take the throne.

"Prince," Damien, Natasha, Beatrice, and Jennifer said.

"My Prince," Jack said, smiling up at her as he shivered for a moment. This was not a typical circumstance, her joining him in his social affairs. Perhaps he was nervous she might be cruel to him, like she had been at the ball, and bathe him in sexuality.

She might, but not yet.

“Prince,” the two wolves said, once they noticed the proper greeting.

“Kindred, Uratha,” she said. “I am glad my joining you has not dissuaded this meeting.”

Beatrice shrugged. “We were just gonna talk, maybe watch a movie before sunrise. This is cool, too.”

Antoinette nodded, and made subtle glances toward the rest of them, to see how they reacted to Beatrice’s tone. The Nosferatu was forever familiar, and Antoinette was sure Arturo and Matthew would be as well, once they realized it was acceptable to be so. She was not sure it was acceptable; perhaps it was better to keep that interaction formal.

Jennifer was staring at her, her bust, her dress, her everything. Maybe the Ventrue had thought Antoinette would come to Bloodlust in something a little more conservative. A silly notion. What was more intriguing though, was how the two werewolves struggled to not look at her. It was only natural of course, when wearing a dress designed to emphasize and display her beauty and sexuality. Natasha was looking too, which was terribly adorable. Had she told her two boyfriends that she had spied on the Prince while she made love to her little Ventrue?

No one said anything else, and Antoinette raised a brow as she looked at the rest of them.

“Please, speak as if I were not present.”

“Easier said than done,” Beatrice said. “No offense.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, leaned back in the booth seat, and slid out an arm to hook it over Jack’s shoulders. She pulled him, snug to her side, and grinned at Beatrice.

“Try.”

Beatrice would never be convinced with requests or bribes, no, but the juvenile woman would respond to challenge.

The Nos smirked at her, shrugged, and relaxed into the booth in mimicry. Antoinette could tell Beatrice, and all of them, were tense with her around, tense in the way someone might be if they expected a larger predator to randomly become aggressive and attack them. They did not know what to think about her presence. Antoinette did not, either. She was here as Jack’s date, more or less, not as the Prince, but that was an inescapable part of her life. It would be interesting to see if the others could move past it.

Arturo mirrored the Nos’s shrug, and leaned in. “What’s the news?”

“Isabella and Hella think the shaman woman is in Devil’s Corner, too,” Jack said. “She’s managed to get a sighting, a convincing one, and an apartment building to investigate.”

“That’s pretty damn good.” Matt leaned in as well, though Antoinette could see he kept sneaking glances her way. Both to check and see if she was agitated or looking to be aggressive, but also to examine her body. Poor man had no sense of subtlety, and when combined with his jovial nature, made him adorable. Art wore his grit and cynicism openly, where Matt did the same with his gentleness and kindness. What had Natasha said they sometimes called Matt? Lenny? The Of Mice and Men reference was terribly cute, and fit the two of them well.

“This shaman woman,” Jennifer said, “we think she’s the one that performed the ritual, that we think led them to Jack? We think this is her, and we think she might be in this apartment building? And we think all this because of Azamel’s vague description?”

“Correct,” Damien said. “This could easily be nothing. It could also be a trap. I should investigate first.”

“You volunteering?” Jack said.

“Yes. Though I would appreciate some nearby back up, in case things get sour.”

“Of course. I’ll be there.”

And just like that, Jack had thrown himself into harm’s way, again. Far be it from her to tell the boy how to live his second life, but that was exactly what she had done last night. At least this time, he would be on the sidelines, while the Sanctified boy would be the one risking his life.

“You coming?” Art said, looking at her.

Before she could respond, Jennifer leaned in. “Elders don’t normally do things hands-on, Arturo.”

Art raised a brow, before nodding his head toward Antoinette while looking at Jennifer. “This looks hands-on to me.”

Once he looked her way again, Antoinette returned his gaze, and looked deep into dark, brown eyes. A troubled childhood, a rough upbringing, and now the man relied on the honesty and closeness of his pack, to keep himself from ever feeling so afraid again. She wondered if the man realized how obviously he wore such a past on his face, borderline on his sleeve.

“We are all dealing with this hunter threat,” she said, “but Miss Denver is correct. I would not help with my own hands, unless absolutely necessary.” If she died, the city would fall into chaos, and

the Invictus and Carthians would undoubtedly go to war. As much as she sometimes wished to risk doing things herself, it was better this way.

Arturo squinted at her, until Natasha pat his side.

“She’s right. It’s n-not smart, for the leader to go in first.”

Antoinette smiled at her little student, nodded, but said no more. She was here to observe, after all, and only interject when necessary.

“Avery goes in first.”

Jennifer shook her head. “Avery doesn’t have millions of people balancing precariously on a knife’s edge. Avery doesn’t get to live for forever either. Don’t think your wolf tactics apply, Arturo Ibarra, or hold a candle to Kindred tactics. We rule the world for a reason.”

Rule the world. Well, at least the Ventrue thought big. Kindred did rule the world as far as matters of kine were concerned, but it was not so clear cut when considering the bigger picture.

“Guys, come on,” Jack said. “Not here to talk about this.” He offered the werewolves a quick glare too, before moving on. “I’ll try and play backup, Damien, but the hunters will recognize me on sight, and I’m sure they won’t let me get close a second time.”

“I’ll help,” Natasha said. “I can keep you hidd-den.”

Two Mekhet, and powerful ancilla at that, helping Jack, was a step in the right direction.

“Avery would prefer we stay out of this, for now,” Matt said, “but if Tash is going to risk her neck, we’ll go too.”

Art offered his fellow wolf a punch in the shoulder, a gentle one, buddy-buddy like. Too cute, how these boys were, indeed, boys. How someone like Natasha ended up with rough-and-tumble sorts like the two men sitting around her, Antoinette could not fathom. It takes all sorts, she supposed. And having Jessy as her friend no doubt prepared her for the uncouth stupidity of such types.

“Avery will get pissed,” he said.

Matt shrugged, and returned the punch. “Isn’t she always?”

Tash giggled. Charming and pleasant, Antoinette struggled to not beam a smile at her little student.

“Be sure to let us know how it goes,” Jennifer said.

Damien raised a brow. “Not coming?”

“Fuck no. I ain’t risking my neck unless I’ve got a few dominated kine with shotguns between me and them. And it’s a stealth mission, right? Not like you need all of us.”

“Besides,” Beatrice said, “we’re doing our own thing.”

“We noticed,” Art said.

The Nos met the man’s gaze, leaned in close across the booth, and grinned at him, a big enough grin to expose some of her crocodile teeth. “You weren’t invited to that meeting. Be happy Jacob didn’t tear you in half and throw your guts into the ritual bowl.”

Art returned the gaze, and leaned in just as much. Very similar, these two creatures. “Your boss is going to bring a calamity down on your heads if he keeps fucking with shit.”

“You don’t know Jacob,” Jennifer said. “None of us really do. The only person who could really understand what that man is up to, is the Prince.”

And, again, everyone at the booth looked to her.

“I will not speak for Jacob, and his actions are his own; if you get into a confrontation with him, do it at your own risk, young wolves. But, I will say that my old friend is not some idiot child pursuing grand agendas on a whim. Give credit where credit is due, Mister Ibarra, Mister Wilson. Jacob is no fool.” She hoped. “Is Jacob who we wish to be speaking of, tonight?”

“I hope not,” Jack said. “Where’s Fiona? Thought she’d be here.”

“She’ll be here soon, I imagine,” Beatrice said. “I spoke to her a little while ago. I’m still surprised about Eric being a werewolf. God damn.”

Matthew shrugged and shook his head. “Dude’s an asshole.”

Natasha choked on a laugh, and hit the man in the side with a tiny fist. “He’s just confused! He... it’s n-normal to be lost, when your life changes, l-like that.”

“Agreed.” Jack nodded his chin toward Antoinette, before looking to the rest of the group. “Should have seen me when I realized I was dead now. Ran out of my sire’s bathroom in a panic, crying out to Julias ‘I’m dead oh fuck I’m dead!’”

Everyone chuckled, Antoinette included. It was a pleasing image, her silly Ventrue, tripping over himself with panic.

“I did think he was working today,” Damien said. “I’m surprised he’s not here.”

“He l-left,” Tash said, “to... to... go b-be alone, I guess? Jessy went after him.”

After a few more minutes, Athalia and Fiona appeared. Athalia was dressed for the street, which frustrated Antoinette to no end. She would look beautiful if she wore more dresses like that time at the ball. Fiona did. The saucy little creature was wearing a green dress with plunging cleavage, showing off her impressive bust.

“Wow, a ton of folk!” Giggling, Fiona came up to the booth, and leaned over the table. “Aww, no Jessy?” The growing smile, and a glance around with searching eyes put more weight into that question than Antoinette expected. “Or Eric?”

“He left,” Tash said again. “Um, I think J-Jessy was chasing after him.”

“I think she likes him.” Giggling yet again, Fiona slid into the booth, next to the werewolves. A moth to flame.

“Thought you liked him?” Jack said.

She shrugged, and traced invisible lines in the table. “He’s sexy! But I dinnae ken if I like like him.” Whether she knew it or not, Fiona slipped a glance Damien’s way.

The girl was a fool, a young, silly fool. Were she Kindred, such reckless sexuality and flirtations would be perfectly safe and acceptable. But as a Begotten, pregnancy was a risk, if copulating with non-Kindred; Athalia and Angela was proof of that. Then again, Antoinette was overreacting, due to her natural distrust of the monsters. She knew that, and she forced her reflex down, so she could reevaluate. There was nothing wrong with Fiona’s unbridled whims, but, hopefully, the girl did not let her actions trap her in unwanted situations.

She was trying to make Damien jealous, this little redheaded monster. Antoinette smiled, and glanced Damien’s way as well; the boy was glancing Fiona’s way, before looking down. He found her attractive, naturally, and he squirmed a little. Tres mignon, but stupid. Fiona would need night marshaling wands to guide the man, not subtle eye glances. But she herself was far too young to know what she wanted.

Antoinette chuckled. This was delightful. Everyone here was silly and youthful, and making all the mistakes young people should. Even the older, such as Tash and Damien, were slaves to ignorance; to which, the only cure was knowledge and experience. Tash was frequently being buried in new experiences now, if the glances she was casting her boyfriends’ way was any indication. Damien, on the other hand, had little such experience. Perhaps Fiona would change that, or someone else? The boy no longer worked for that psychopath Lucas, and maybe now could find a little happiness in the touch of another.



“Athalia, Fiona,” Jack said, “we got some more information on a possible location of the shaman.” The boy filled them in on the potential building the shaman may have been hiding in. Antoinette doubted the hunters would be hiding anything in an apartment building, but it was also true that the Kindred did not have many eyes in Devil’s Corner.

A difficult game to balance. She had many thralls combing the city for hunters, many keeping an eye on the Carthians, and many keeping an eye on the Invictus. She also had thralls keeping an eye on the Begotten, and the Circle, though the latter was difficult, with Jacob’s skills. Part of her was tempted to suggest she send some of her thralls to this building Isabella and Hella had discovered, but it could easily backfire. If discovered, it would spur the hunters to find a new hiding place. Hunters were undoubtedly trained in noticing thralls.

A difficult balance indeed.

“Hey Damien, how’s the hole in your gut?” Beatrice said.

Damien tensed; a peculiar reaction. Antoinette watched the man meet Beatrice’s gaze, before it eventually fell away, some hidden weight forcing his head down. A glance to Beatrice showed, she too, was displaying some awkwardness. Something had happened between them.

“Been healed for a long time,” he said.

“That’s good.”

Another conversation that came to a standstill. Perhaps her presence was causing harm to the flow of their conversation. She had predicated it would, but it was a bit sad to see it happen. Unfortunately, she was Prince, their ruler, and despite Jack’s efforts, she would never be able to simply sit, and converse with those she ruled. Not like how she conversed with Jack, at least.

Jennifer leaned in, and looked at her. Not Beatrice, or Fiona or Athalia, or the men, but her. And she took her time looking the Prince up and down, what she could see above the booth table. Some of her Ventrue pride, manifesting as a contest of wills, perhaps?

“You look fucking amazing in that dress, by the way,” Jennifer said, voice without break, eyes unwavering. “You could have come naked though. Same diff.”

Several of the people in the booth coughed, some choking on them.

Antoinette returned the woman’s defiant smile. “As do you. Though I fear if you tripped, some random man’s cock would end up trapped between your breasts.” It was a tube top after all, and would be perfect for such a sexual act.

Her words earned some more coughs, and some choking sounds as several of the paranormals at the table struggled to not laugh. The Begotten and Uratha, unfortunately, were slaves to their biology, and could not help but blush a little.

Jennifer, on the other hand, laughed outright, and sat back. Test passed. Yes, you silly Ventrue, I am as sexually confident as you, and all the more. If you had any idea, any idea at all, you would not have challenged me.

“That is a good idea,” Beatrice said, leaning back, and hooking an arm around her friend’s shoulder. “Keep that on, and we’ll test it out on Julias when he’s free.”

Athalia facepalmed, while Fiona giggled and blushed. Tash’s boys were squirming, obviously unfamiliar with women behaving so brazenly. It was their first trip to Dolareido after all, and their chosen mate was a shy thing herself. Mason had fallen in with one of Dolareido’s more outgoing Kindred, Tilly of the Carthians, and he no doubt knew how forward Dolareido Kindred could be. Natasha was the exception, not the rule.

Or at least, she used to be. Again, Antoinette grinned at her tiny student, and how she was squeezed tight between Art and Matt on the small amount of space available in the booth. Tash looked uncomfortable with the conversation, but not with the two boys. In fact, she seemed embarrassed, probably because the conversation was touching on sexual acts she had performed. The delicious little creature.

“You vamps really do talk about nothing but sex,” Athalia said.

“Hey now!” Fiona shook her head frowned at her fellow monster. “I enjoy it! Left my hometown for this.”

“You left your hometown because there was no one there to feed on.” Laughing, Athalia managed something akin to a real, normal smile. “I think your choice of city was misplaced though.”

“Oh?” Antoinette said.

“Yeah, lot of adultery and shit in Dolareido, but that’s not what Fiona—actually, far be it from me to tell you what Fiona feasts on.”

The group looked to the feisty redhead. Indeed, what did she feed on?

“... I... it’s um, personal, sort of.” Squirming, Fiona shifted around in her seat, and managed a small smile for Antoinette. “But, I feed on... on abusive folk. I punish them.”

Yes, Jack had told Antoinette about Fiona's hunger, what little she shared with him and Damien. It was not much to go on. Damien knew more, but the man had not shared those details; at least, not that Jack shared with her.

"I suppose you could feed on me then, mm?" Antoinette said. She had been plenty abusive toward people, when she felt they deserved it.

"Um, I... I could have a go!" Giggling like a schoolgirl, Fiona squirmed and adjusted a strap of her dress. "But, but I cannae feed unless ye're afraid. Normally, I'd take someone back to my lair, and tie them up in my web. The real assholes, the big meanies, the ones that bully folk hard, drive folk to suicide, or beat folk up. Those, I... I had a habit of killing, and eating, too. Cause Vrall can do that, and that extra bit of terror, and punishment, was like icing on a magic cake."

Interesting. Was fear a prerequisite to all Begotten feedings? She was tempted to ask, but Athalia was already giving Fiona a rather pointed glare; she did not like having her species' secrets revealed, but it was Fiona's choice to do so.

Everyone else at the table raised brows. Yes, devouring a person whole was strange, and it had been at least a century since Antoinette had drank someone to death. The Uratha did not need to eat humans in any capacity, though she knew they enjoyed the taste of it, in the rare cases it occurred.

"There have been few reports of kine deaths that have gone unexplained, since our meeting about the issue, my dear Fiona. I am impressed with the control you and your fellow Begotten have shown." Credit where credit was due, there had been no deaths she could blame on the Begotten since then.

"Cheers! I've been getting better at feeding on folk lightly. I'm aye a wee hungry, but it's manageable."

"Hunger sucks," Beatrice said. "Those nightmare lair things you have, we can enter those when we're sleeping? It's a nightmare, right? I wonder if—"

A phone rang. Everyone pulled out their phones, even the wolves, checking their new phones. But all for naught, as Antoinette held up a hand to claim guilt for the disturbance. She pulled out her phone, and checked the message.

~I'm at 843 Baker's Street. Another ritual found.~ Daniel never did care for greetings.

Sighing, she quickly texted back. ~Terry's face?~

~No.~