~~Natasha~~

Art got up and started to look around her apartment, fingers dragging along her counter tops, her couches, her tables, her laptop. They stopped on the laptop in particular when his eyes found the screen.

“Researching ancient Egypt mm?”

“I… I uh….” She reached over and closed it. Didn’t want them gleaming any more than they needed. Or at least that was the plan, but the two wolves were telling her a lot. Maybe she should reciprocate a little? “Why… why are you t-telling me so much?”

Matt shrugged. “Like we said, we’re not your enemies. Besides, you seem nice.”

“Shit load nicer than the Kindred in Tijuana,” Art said.

“You came from T-T-Tijuana?” Art did look like he could have come from Mexico.

“Half the pack,” Matt said. “Clara, Art, Stephanie, Teresa, and Javier did. Avery drifted around the world after she lost her pack, so she tells it. Met some of us further North, met a bunch of us in Tijuana, and we’ve sort of wandered around.”

“Which no one likes.” Art ambled to her couch in front of the large TV, and he sat down with a bit of a bounce. Her poor couch; Art was a big guy. Not as big as Matt, but still, the man was big enough to make her couch creak with the impact. “We’re Meninna. We don’t want to drift around, we want a home.”

“A home? You mean… D-D-Dolareido?”

Art shrugged, and started looking around the couch and the end table. “Maybe. Most of the pack is used to city living. You got a remote for this colossal thing?”

She blinked at the man, and pointed to the remote on the kitchen table. He fetched it, and immediately started one of the streaming apps on the television. Making his home already.

“What’s Meninna?”

“First Tongue word for the Hunters in Darkness, our tribe,” Matt said. “Sort of like your covenants. The Meninna don’t like to drift; we want a home. We were in Tijuana, and weren’t getting along with the Kindred there at all. Got to the point it was going to be war, so… Avery decided to leave.”

“Leave? D-Doesn’t… sound like something an Uratha would do. Thought y-you would fight for your t-t-t-territory.”

“We would have,” Art said, “if Avery was the person you all suspect she is, that Jacob suspects she is. Much as David guided us here, I’m sure Avery agreed partially cause she wants to fix the shit she stirred here.”

“I… I know she got some Kindred killed, during the hunt. But how’s J-Jacob fit into this?”

Art looked over the couch shoulder at her, and raised an eyebrow. “Avery killed Minerva, Jacob’s sweetheart. More than sweetheart, from what she says.”

Natasha winced. She’d started putting that picture together, but to hear it put so directly was chilling. Jacob had someone he loved, and Avery took her away. Brutally, if Tasha’s own encounter with the wolves was any indication.

“Jacob is… a dangerous man, Arturo. If he wants Avery d-dead, he’ll… he’ll make it happen.” No getting around that.

Art shrugged, scratched his neck a couple times, and returned to watching TV. “He can try. Wouldn’t be the first elder we’ve had to put down.”

Natasha shivered again. These wolves had so much confidence, but the man seemed quite serious, and Matt nodded with his friend’s words. And worst of all, Natasha could feel the strength they radiated; the beast in her gut felt like a pup in comparison.

“Hey, how old are you?” Matt said. “Can never tell with vampires.”

“Me? I… I was in my early twenties when I was embraced. That w-was… about fifty years ago.”

Both men whistled in unison, with the same pitch. How long had these two been friends? Must have been decades to be so in sync.

“Art and I both experienced our first change when we were in our late teens. Must have been thirty years ago.”

That pulled a smile out of her, despite herself. She was older than them, but she looked younger. Werewolves seemed to age, albeit slower than humans. But, for all their strength, they weren’t immortal, the one advantage Kindred seemed to have over the Uratha. And it was quite the advantage, when you lived to be as old as Jacob or Antoinette, when you had multiple fortunes in funds, and dozens of loyal agents skulking in the shadows.

“The first change? What w-was that like?”

Art winced and looked back to the TV. Uh oh. She looked over at Matt, and the man winced as well as he looked down at the counter top.

“Tough question,” Matt said. “Some people just go nuts and destroy their gym, like I did. Some people can end up killing nearby bystanders, like Art.” He tilted his head to his friend. When Natasha looked back to Art, the man wasn’t looking their way anymore. He had his eyes on the TV, but she could see the side of his face, and the small frown he held. But he turned down the TV volume, and turned on the captions; nice of him.

“Y-You lose control?”

Matt nodded. “Yeah. After that, we’re Uratha. See the world differently, see it like wolves. Learn the First Tongue like a scene from the Matrix, injected straight into the brain. Some of us start hearing and seeing things, like David. And we’re all changed in unique ways. I became Rahu; Kindred in Tijuana called us warriors… and barbarians, when they felt like being jerks. Art became Irraka; Kindred in Tijuana called them assassins.”

Art laughed, and rolled his head back to look over his shoulder at them again, frown replaced with a smirk. “I’m sure they were trying to insult me too. Not much of an insult, saying I’m good at my job.”

Natasha tilted her head and looked at the man. Art was an assassin? She could… understand that way of thinking.

She touched her chest. “I’m Mekhet. We… we’re… sneaky.”

The two wolves laughed. Big, hearty laughs, and nodded. “Yeah, you are.” Again, in unison.

“I… I don’t t-t-talk with Kindred in other cities… almost ever. We keep to ourselves, usually. What were they like? In T-T-Tijuana.”

“Brutal,” Art said, “nothing like how Avery said Dolareido is. Much as shit ended badly last time she was here, she had nothing but good things to say about the Kindred situation. Other than the Prince messing with the Gauntlet.”

“D-Does her messing with the Gauntlet make her your enemy?” She had to talk to Antoinette about the Gauntlet. Did she know what that meant? The Prince must have, if she dealt with the Uratha in the past. But whatever happened with the Uratha back then, it wasn’t stopping Antoinette from experimenting with the occult.

“No,” Matt said. “It would, if she was causing some serious imbalances. But, honestly? I’m surprised. Despite Avery’s concerns, despite David’s warning, things aren’t bad here. Not yet.”

“That’s… good then?”

“Maybe,” Art said, “maybe not. The hosts are sneaky fuckers, sneakier than any Mekhet. And we haven’t been here long enough to have scouted the whole city. Other things from the Shadow are hiding in the city too, we know that. And other things again.” The man sighed, ran his fingers through his black hair a few times, and motioned for the two of them to come to him. “Sit, watch. My favorite show has two new seasons I haven’t been able to watch, and I plan to binge.”

She blinked at him, got up off her stool, walked over to him, leaned toward his face, and blinked at him a few more times from close range. “Excuse me? This is m-m-my place!”

“What, you don’t like Game of Thrones?”

“I… I do, but—”

“Come on.” He reached out for her, took her two shoulders, and picked her up like she was weightless. She squeaked and started squirming, but all it did was land her on the couch beside Art. “I sense an impending sex scene and I don’t want to miss it.”

She blinked a dozen more times, looked down at herself, then at the TV, then at herself, then over at Matt. The big guy winked at her and came over to sit on the couch as well, trapping her between the two men.

Welp, self conscious didn’t begin to describe what she was feeling. She had so much information to share with Antoinette, so much information she needed to filter through to see what was even safe to share with her boss. Too hard to focus on that when she was sitting between two huge wolves, and a combination of deadly circumstances and very hard nipples were on the television screen.

And to make everything worse, when she glanced at Art, he caught her glance and sneaked in a wink before she could snap her head back to the television. When she glanced Matt’s way, he did the same thing! These two ruthless predators acted like a couple of silly buffoons.

Good god what had she gotten herself into.

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~~Damien~~

Someone was looking for him.

Damien listened close, eyes closed, ears as open as he could manage, and he filtered through the quiet hum of the tunnels. At this depth in the tunnels, the sound of the traffic above still made noise, but barely more than a gentle purr. What made more noise was the whirr of ventilation, and computers. His current hiding spot was an old maintenance room off a functioning subway tunnel, for no other reason than sometimes, he wanted to hear nearby people.

Someone was walking down the tunnel to his little hideaway. The trot of high quality shoes on the concrete. Invictus probably. Knock knock.

He opened the door, and eyed the man standing before him. A tall man, dark skin, shaved head, very well dressed. And alive.

“Madam Maria Turio of the Invictus, of the council and triumvirate of the First Estate, would like to speak to you, Mister… Damien.”

Mister Damien. What a joke. Damien sighed and looked the man up and down. Judging by how he carried himself, he was wearing a vest holster under his suit jacket, probably with two different pistols within if he remembered correctly; and he usually did. A high caliber pistol meant for punching holes through barriers, large holes. And likely the fully automatic pistol Invictus occasionally sported. Perfect for reducing a target to mulch. He’d seen the ghouls switch to such armaments not long after the Uratha became a known presence.

Course, they didn’t know that he knew. He was very good at what he did.

“And you are?” Damien said.

“Mister Smith.”

“… sure.” Invictus had the imagination of bricks. “Do I need anything, to speak with the elder Maria?”

“No… except, in the Invictus, we generally refer to people by their last name… Damien.”

And of course Mister Smith didn’t know his. Damien couldn’t help but smirk at that, before he got up and shrugged off his shoulders. For all his cockiness, he was going to be talking to an elder. To Maria Turio. She had two centuries of Kindred life on him. She was an ancient entity, and he was a child next to her, a child who’d avoided other Kindred his entire second life.

It was going to be a weird encounter.

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The Grand Cathedral. Such a magnificent display, such beauty, such imposing brutality. The angels crushing demons, the cross, the virgin Mary. Standing before the enormous building filled him with awe, reverence, and fear.

“This way, Mister Damien.… I must say, it is not customary for Invictus to address each other so formally.” Mister Smith walked up the stairs, and pushed open the grand doorway. He made each step slowly, with weight and impact, as if his very walk was a ceremony to the grandeur of Lucas’s work. “Do you not have a last name we can address you with?”

“… been living in holes and tunnels for half a century, Mister Smith. Barely said a word to anyone in that time. Last names are….” He put his hand up to his face and shook his head. Dramatic, Damien. You don’t have to hide in tunnels anymore, so stop acting like the victim. “Burksen. It’s Burksen.”

“… very good, Mister Burksen.” The ghoul nodded, adjusted his tie, and stepped into the cathedral.

The nave of the huge building. Majesty and powerful elegance, it pulled at his memories and made his insides ache for the comfort of what used to be certainty, what used to be the simple joy of trusting someone else to guide your life. Candles were usually lit, back when he visited the cathedral when Lucas used it. And he saw such candles still existed, but were not lit. He knew Maria slept within the church, but not where.

His gaze lingered on the enormous pipe organ in the far back of the Cathedral. If God’s voice could be given sound, it would be the pipe organ.

Mister Smith waited for him halfway down the aisle, and after a moment to recollect himself, Damien walked after him. The empty pews struck another memory chord, each time he passed one, and he had to shrug the pain off. You’re a new man now, let it go.

By the pipe organ, there was a door. It looked like wood, and a crucifix adorned its face, but as Mister Smith opened it, the weight of its metal bulk became apparent. Damien had never seen the door opened before, but now he could tell it was most definitely meant to be a true barrier, something strong enough to stop Kindred—or at least explosives. Mister Smith took one of the nearby candles, lit it, stepped into the darkness past the door, and motioned for him to follow.

A stairway through darkness lit only by the candlelight of his escort. Every step fought to make him smile; such was a home he could agree with. The weight of the building above and around him felt less a cage, and more a foundation, of structure, of something he could lean his weight on knowing it’d support him.

Just delusions, Damien. You have a lifetime of beliefs to reevaluate, stop falling back on old views.

The stairway opened to a hallway of concrete bricks, not dissimilar to many of the tunnels beneath Dolareido. But this hallway was massive, easily fifty feet wide, twenty feet tall, and lined with candles that hung from braziers on chains, braziers with spikes that jutted from their bottoms, and small ones that lined the sides. Gates of a similar style blocked the tunnel at certain intervals, thick gates, closely knit, spiked bars, a formidable barrier to any humans that might try and break into the elder’s sleeping grounds come daybreak.

Kindred were safe from each other during the day; they were not safe from each other’s ghouls and subservients. It was not unheard of for ambitious — or stupid — Kindred to attack each other during sleeping hours using their servants. Sometimes it worked, but usually Kindred important enough to risk attacking were well guarded in such hours, like Maria.

There were other ghouls walking the underground tunnel, suits, each with a gun in hand; they had shotguns, and he was sure the pistols in their vest holsters were fully automatic. A single bullet was of little danger to a vampire, but a hail of them was a problem.

At each gate, a ghoul on the inside had to open it for them to continue. And not with some old fashioned lock and key or bolt, but with some heavy duty electronic, thick, tri-bolt locks with digital security keypads. The security keypads were subtle at least, likely to preserve the Gothic feel of the tunnel. He could understand; Lucas would have done the same.

With time and many gates behind him, the large tunnel opened into a larger room. Shaped like a dome, the huge room was lined with hanging drapes that covered where the curved concrete met the floor. Each drape was adorned with powerful imagery of history, of men with swords cutting down swaths of people, of victims being hanged by tree branch, of men riding into battle on horseback with bows and arrows. There was a painting of Jesus and the crucifixion, of Longinus stabbing him with the spear, and the following days of torment for Longinus.

Damien stepped closer toward the back wall where Maria was no doubt waiting for him, but his eyes continued to drift toward the decor. More of the hanging braziers with lit candles, but also many tables with various scatterings of objects: knives, swords, metal ornaments of similar intent. Other tables held shrines, more candles lit with tiny pictures surrounding them. But the center of the room and toward the back, it was open space save for a coffin stood upright against the the back wall, and a grand piano beside it.

Maria sat at the piano, dressed in a white nightgown that ran long, spilling over the floor in waves. Upon the piano were more candles, sitting on tiny metal skulls. One man, an ugly fellow with a hunched back and mangled face, slowly walked the room and swept, adjusted the candles, the drapes, everything.

He came close to Damien, and looked down at him from his great height. Big ghoul, one arm larger than the other, and one half of his face drooping so a touch of drool wet his lip. He wiped it away, nodded, made a tiny groan sound, and moved on.

“Forgive Matthias,” Maria said, raspy voice cutting through the quiet, “I rescued him from a mob two hundred years ago. He has since forever been my loyal ghoul and companion.”

“Two hundred years….” Damien managed a small nod for the sauntering man, before he walked past him and toward the ghost woman at the piano. The lighting was dim, even with a hundred candles, and the scattering of light sources made a thousand little shadows dance along every surface.

“Is that so long?” she said. Her fingers were on the keys of her piano, but she wasn’t playing anything yet. No music book either.

“It’s… hard, to think about that long a life.”

“You spent half a century skulking around in the tunnels of this city, Damian Burksen. Half a century with only yourself for company. You are well aware of how long life can be, and how much longer that is when you are alone.” Her fingers started to move. Gentle sounds came from the piano, slow, deep, heavy waves that blanketed the room in the quiet tune. Deep and gentle? Quiet and heavy? Damien didn’t get music, but he knew enough to feel the emotion of the piece. “Frédéric Chopin’s March Funèbre.” Not a name he recognized, but the tune was a little familiar.

He watched and listened for a time, and looked around while the music’s gentle but depressing tone filled the room. March Funèbre indeed.

“You… wanted to speak to me, Madam Turio?” She wasn’t his enemy, no need to make her one. Use her title and maybe this can go smooth.

“You understand this is the first time I’ve seen you in person, Damien? Impressive, considering how long you’ve been in the city. Very impressive.”

“… thank you.”

“You waited fifty years before you felt it was time for Lucas’s return. Patience is another trait I admire, Damien. But your ability to hide and your patience are not why I have asked you here. You are here because Mister Mire has brought your proposal to the Primogen. Or rather, it was brought up by Garry Tones before he was ready to speak of it; the mutt has his eyes and ears everywhere.” She smirked, and stopped playing as her eyes drifted from keys to him. “But, that would be hypocritical of me.”

Damien tried to not stare too much. But Nosferatu had disfigurements, and getting used to them was always a challenge when it was a new Nosferatu. He’d dealt with plenty in his small stint as bishop for Lucas; not enough time to become comfortable with them the way other Kindred had. And Maria’s disfigurements were not subtle. Such ruined skin; he’d seen fire logs that looked better. And the little bits of white mist that dripped from her clothes reeked of ghostliness.

“So… everyone knows then, about Mister Mire’s idea.”

“Indeed.” Maria chuckled, a weird sound coming from her raspy, destroyed voice. “Needless to say, Mister Tones and the Prince are not thrilled with the idea.”

“I imagine not.” Damien looked down at the piano keys when Maria’s gaze became too much.

Seemed she got the hint, and started playing something different. When Damian raised a brow, she leaned into the piano a little to emphasize a note.

“Do you not recognize this piece?”

“It… I recognize it, but that’s it.”

“Claude Debussy’s Suite bergamasque, third movement. Light… of the moon.” She closed her eyes, and fell into each soft note. A very delicate piece of music, like floating on clouds. “Quite the famous piece, played everywhere and used in media all over the world.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that, Madam Turio. The past fifty years left little in the way of exposure to media.”

“… did you hide in a hole the whole duration of your secrecy, Burksen?”

“Mostly. I realized Devil’s Corner was usually ignored by Kindred, and the tunnels beneath it. So I hung out there a lot, but even then, I mostly stuck to the shadows.”

The elder nodded. “And that is where much of my concern lies. You were chosen by Lucas before such hardships, when you were a young kine, devoted and… moved, by the enthusiasm Lucas carried.”

“… enthusiasm is an understatement, Elder. Lucas had the royal power of Ventrue and the suave wit of Daeva.” He winced as he looked down and let the memories come back. Easier to keep them buried and not think about it, but Maria didn’t seem to share that sentiment.

“He was also a tyrant.”

Again he winced, and not subtly either. Maria caught it, tilted her head to the side with his obvious discomfort, and waited.

“Yes, he was,” he said after a few far-too-long minutes of silence. “I… regret that I did not see it in him, when he chose me, embraced me. Perhaps I could have done something to change him. But….”

“But?”

“I was just an ideological child when he embraced me. And before I could learn the reality, the purge began. We had to disappear into the tunnels, far into the depths, into tunnels only he knew about. Before I could learn what sort of man he really was, he went into torpor, to sleep until… better times.”

Through it all, Maria didn’t stop playing. “He trusted you with his life, Burksen. I remember, before Antoinette began the purge, before your embrace, Lucas told me about you. A bright young pupil, and loyal, and eager to read the full Testament of Longinus.”

“All too loyal. Yes, I was fascinated with the views found in the abridgment, and I devoured the full testament. I was… so eager, to join the Sanctified. So eager to serve God, to… please the Archbishop, and serve his goals.”

“Gaining the loyalty of the young is a common tactic of dictators, tyrants, and war mongers.” At last the elder stopped playing, tapped her chin a few times, and started playing once again. Started innocently enough, somber and slow, but soon her left hand was playing a complicated arrangement, while her right hand was a blur of notes, flighty, almost whimsical, before it descended into heavy steps spiraling downward without losing speed. And then back up again. Good god it was like watching a spider dance along the keys.

“How… how long did that take to learn to play?”

“Days, but then, I was practicing the piano since 1823, Damien Burksen. Chopin, and this piece, Fantaisie Impromptu, is… precious. The Archbishop first introduced me to the power of Frédéric Chopin. He….” She spoke without missing a single note, and there were a lot of notes. “It might interest you to know, that Archbishop is not a title Lucas earned.”

“It wasn’t?” Damien came in closer, and put a hand on the piano’s body as he watched the ghost woman play, if it could be called playing. To play at that speed and without pause while she talked, the ghost woman may as well have merged with the piano and considered it a part of her. “I… I knew he called himself Archbishop, as did the other bishops. And even the Prince called him that.”

“He became the most powerful bishop in the city within days of his arrival. And soon after, nearby smaller cities recognized his power. He took the title Archbishop to recognize his position, a title normally saved for a Sanctified Prince.”

“… arrogant of him.”

Maria smiled at him. “I enjoyed his bravado. I enjoyed his confidence, his wit and intelligence. He enjoyed mine.”

Damien’s hand fell from the piano, and he looked away. In all the chaos, past and present, it was easy to forget Maria and Lucas were romantic with each other. Easy to not realize this wasn’t just about her getting to know him, but him meeting the love of the man, the tyrant, he’d planned to serve faithfully.

“It… is a shame,” he said, “that… that everything… fell apart. That… the Prince and Daniel had to kill him.” One word, one name, and the man responsible for Lucas’s death would be a dead man. He could feel the J on his lips. Just say the kid’s name, and the boy’s death would be certain. He got into your skull, made you kill your fellow Kindred, made you cut off your sire’s head.

No. He wasn’t that much of an idiot. And he didn’t lie to Jack either. He hoped.

“How familiar are you with the Testament of Longinus, Damien Burksen?”

“Quite familiar, Madam Turio. The Malediction, the Torments, the Rule of Golgotha, the Sanguinaria, and Book of Eschaton. I have read them all… hundreds of times. I still have the extended edition that Lucas owned, with thousands of interpretations of passages by various Archbishops.” Not that any of their interpretations had ever truly helped him find meaning in the book. The passages themselves carried weight, but… tainted, colored by Lucas’s words. He had work to do, to undo that damage.

After a few minutes of music, she stopped playing and got up. He took a step back; didn’t mean to or try to, but he couldn’t help it. Having a near three-hundred-year-old vampire who looked like a ghost walking within a few feet of you was not something he was used to. She frowned at his mistake, and he forced himself to step back in toward her.

“And you feel comfortable teaching the word of Longinus?”

“… does any bishop feel comfortable teaching it?”

Maria smirked at him. “True enough, Burksen.” Trying to interpret the journey of Longinus was difficult. Trying to interpret the rules more difficult. Trying to interpret the prophecies into valuable wisdom nigh impossible. “If you become a bishop, and the Prince allows it, your job will be twofold. You will have to teach the Testament of Longinus to those who will listen, and that will be far more difficult without Tony’s old lair and its… unnatural influence. But even more importantly Burksen, you will be a keeper and chronicler of history. What Garry has not yet managed to destroy, what I managed to salvage, you will maintain.”

Oh. He’d expected this meeting to be about his ability to teach the Testament of Longinus, not about becoming a chronicler. That was actually kind of uplifting.

“I have more faith in my abilities to manage books and—”

“It’s 2017, Burksen.” A frown followed, but not a harsh one. She almost seemed amused. “You won’t be living inside books by candlelight anymore. You will have to get used to managing a combination of the old and the new.” She stopped by some laptops sitting on a table, plugged in.

Electricity in such a Gothic setting; offensive, or at least that’s how Lucas would have felt about it. Old fashioned to a fault. Damien never held Lucas’s distaste for technology, but at the same time, the explosion of commercial computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, much of it had slipped by him.

God he wished he could be back in his tower, watching the city with his telescope.

“I think I can handle that,” he said. Maybe he could ask Natasha for help.

Natasha. He still had to visit her, without Jack in the way. Still had to apologize. That was going to be painful.

“Good. The digital era has brought with it a means for our kind to save our records in ways it could not before. But the digital world abandoned the soul of things, so you will have to hold the objects of the past in high regard as well. Preserve the soul with ways of old, and preserve the knowledge with ways of new.” She gestured to the paintings, the drapes, the various artifacts that sat around on many of the tables. Old knives, old books, crosses, swords and staves, chalices, shrines of gold, and carvings of skulls made of metal.

“Am… am I to understand that… you’ll be my goto in this pursuit, Madam Turio?”

“With all the bishops dead, Lucas dead, and the remnants of the Lancea et Sanctum in tatters here in Dolareido, do you have a better idea?”

“… no, I don’t.”

“Do you have an issue with me as your… partner, in this endeavor, Burksen?”

“No ma’am.”

“Good.” She moved on, scarred fingers tracing along the tables she walked past before her journey took her toward the massive drapes that hung from the walls, and the enormous pictures weaved into them. “Have you encountered any of the Begotten or Uratha in the city, Burksen?”

Interesting direction to take the conversation. What was she driving at?

“I have not, Madam Turio.”

“Come now Burksen, understand that since we’ve been aware of your existence, all the covenants are keeping an eye on you in some fashion or another. The Invictus know you’ve talked with Fiona Young.”

Damn.

“I… thought it best to leave Fiona out of this. She’s young, and naive.”

“Hmmm. Maybe. That may change and change drastically once she talks with Azamel, as she no doubt will.”

“I wonder how that conversation will go,” he said.

“As do I.”

“You… you wish I accompany Fiona, when she goes to meet Azamel.”

“Smart man.” Maria walked to the other side of the table, and smirked at him as she started to rummage through some more electronics on the table, tablets and such. “You’re not Invictus, so this is not an order. This is a partnership. I provide you with resources, both of the Second Estate’s property and the First Estate’s funds, while you provide me with information. Since… since Natasha Vola’s departure, I have lost a rather talented set of eyes and ears.”

The delightful links between Maria and Damian continued to show themselves. Their love for a psychopath, and their connection to Natasha.

“I’m afraid I can’t replace Natasha as a right hand of the Invictus.”

“No, you can’t. But some information goes a long way, Burksen. Keep an eye and ear open for me, and I will support your role as bishop. To the Prince, as well.” After digging through a small shelf of what sounded like an array of tablets, she pulled out a smartphone and tossed it his way. “Here’s your new phone number. Do we have a deal?”

“… deal.”

“I have no doubt you will also run into the Uratha at some point. Take care with Avery, Damien Burksen. She may not have Simon leading her this time, but last time…. Be careful, she is all too willing get physical. Stay out of the Devil’s Corner tunnels, for now.”

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That went much better than he thought possible. First encounter with Maria Turio, and she seemed to like him, maybe even trust him a little.

Being called Burksen twenty times in a conversation was not fun though. Invictus and their obsession with last names grated on him, but it was a small price to pay for her support. If it could be called that. Contractual obligation? He was going to be Maria’s new eyes and ears. God, if only she knew about Jack.

He started the walk back to his normal hideout; knew the shortest route, and he slipped into the old subway tunnels as easily as kine breathed. The metal door still a ways down the tunnel, he stopped as he heard the knock knock of knuckles against it, and the clop of boots against the tunnel’s concrete base.

“Fiona?”

“Damian! Been looking for ye. Wanted some help in the tunnels down ‘ere, under Devil’s Corner.”

Of course, where Maria didn’t want him going. “You sure, Fiona? The Uratha have given orders to Kindred to stay out of there.”

“Aye well, I’m nae Uratha, and you’re a sneaky, fast fucker, aye?” She hopped over to him, beamed up at him, and put her hands together in front of her, complete with squishing her breasts together with her biceps. Very blatant I-need-your-help-and-aren’t-I-hot tactic. Made him chuckle.

“I’m serious Fiona.”

“Me too. There werewolves might be hunting me; I’m needing to clear my name.”

“Clear your name?”

“Aye! The werewolves are hunting for something in a place I frequent. And with the spiderwebs and the disappearances—one of which is nae my doing! There’s something going on Damien, and I’m wanting to investigate.”

“I… I don’t think it’s a good idea, Fiona. Better to just stay out of sight for a while, and—”

“I have to ken what’s going on, Damien. How come werewolves hunting me? I haven’t done anything that’d make them want to hurt me, I think?”

“For all we know, the—”

“Na na no!” She started turning around in spot, stomping her feet and waving her arms. “We have to go to the tunnels beneath Devil’s Corner! The answer is there, it has to be!”

“… don’t you contain some very ancient monster entity inside you?” You’re acting like a child. Best to not say that out loud to the ancient monster acting like a child.

“Aye, I do, so ye better nae say na to me. And… and that might have something to do with what the wolves want with me. If it’s me! So I’m going down to the tunnels to see what’s going.”

“You haven’t been down there as of late?”

“Nae since we saw Jack, since he said Kindred were investigating those tunnels. Then when I heard about the Uratha hunting something, I… something’s going on. We’re gonnae find out what. And besides, ye owe me for not killing ye when ye invaded my lair!”

Shit. This was a dumb idea. Very very dumb idea.

But the girl was giving him obviously manipulative, pouty lips and breast squishing and swishing her shoulders from side to side; it was too adorable. And she really was liable to get herself killed if he didn’t help her. Girl was strong in her dream world, but in the real world, her tricks were nothing he couldn’t handle. And if he could, the Uratha could.

Damn it, it was too easy to like her.

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Shouldn’t be doing this. Shouldn’t be doing this. Shouldn’t be doing this. Your new boss specifically told you to not do this. And yet he was doing it.

Not your boss. Partner. Hard to think of it as a partnership considering how the conversation with Maria had gone down; elders never engaged in conversations with younger Kindred unless they could control it. He was the submissive in that conversation, because had to be. Didn’t like it, but it was kind of nice talking to a Kindred old enough to be in charge, to be powerful enough to handle their affairs without the Prince bullying them.

Focus. You’re in tunnels the whole damn city is up in arms about, pay attention.

Fiona was walking, or marching like a toy in the Nutcracker play. Every so often she smiled at him, kicked her feet out as she walked, bounced a few times, and got ahead a few steps. There were far less lights in this part of the tunnels, but it was enough to see by. Which was enough for Fiona to feel comfortable goofing around, apparently. Girl could see in total blackness if his first encounter with her was any indication.

“You’re awfully comfortable,” he whispered.

“Aye. Spend a lot of time in the dark.” She shrugged at him, hooked her hands in her jean pockets, and started walking backward. Not easy to do with every step a potential for tripping on the tracks, but she managed. “I came to Dolareido cause my online friends said my home town was dull, boring. And they were right, compared to Dolareido anyway.”

“Your friends live in Dolareido?”

“Aye. There’s Zoe and Jen and Chloe. Right trio of sluts they are. But then Dolareido seems to bring that out in folk doesn’t it? Everybody ‘ere seems ferr comfy getting high and fucking in parked cars or clubs or the back of theaters.”

Yes, yes they did, much as he disliked it. Not God’s path for the kine; but then, if you considered the weight of a sin, fucking around always ranked pretty low on his list compared to theft or murder.

“The Prince and the others created this city to be a prime feeding ground for Kindred, among other things. So, vices like sex or drug abuse are ignored, and sometimes encouraged. The police are pretty tough on major crimes like murder, but people getting high on whatever drug, and fucking in each other in whatever place? The police ignore them. And they’re easy marks for a hungry Kindred.” And, he had to admit, he’d had his fair share of meals from such circumstances. Course he used the opportunity to try and guide them toward the church, a little scare here, a bible there.

“Beatrice tells me yer Lancea et Sanctum group dinnae like sex?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “The rules of God are for kine, not the Kindred. If I wanted to, I could indulge in every sin and not violate the beliefs of my order, as long as I encouraged the humans to look for faith in God.”

“Strange beliefs.”

“Yes, they are. And… after Lucas died, I question them more and more every day.” Undoing brainwashing was a painful process. Ticks, habits, views ingrained into his very subconscious that he had to question. “I sometimes wonder if I understand my religion at all. Lucas’s views about many things were beyond strict.”

“Strict? So nae sex for ye?”

“Not with kine—humans, no.”

“Ah, that’s a shame.” She got in closer and started walking normally again, but not without the occasional nudge of her shoulder against his arm. Flirtatious, this girl. At least in human form. “Beatrice told me humans really get off on being sucked. Like, cum their brains out if ye touch them during the Kiss.”

“I… wouldn’t know.”

“Nae with humans na. How about with Kindred?”

“No.”

“… at all?”

“… no.”

“Haven’t ye been a vampire for fifty years?” She raised a brow at him, like it was the most absurd thing in the world that he hadn’t had sex. “And ye were alive a good while before that. Nae even a quick lay then?”

“… no. When I was human, it was a… weird time in my life. Then I was a fugitive and forced to hide for fifty years. Sex never came up.”

“That is buggered. Are ye still gonnae follow those super strict beliefs?”

He sighed and pulled some of the hair out of his eyes. Still wearing the half-shaved head look, front to back, so half of his head had black hair down to his shoulder.

“I… think it is time for a change. If I’m going to be in charge of the Lancea et Sanctum in this city, I can’t ignore how much the world has changed in fifty years, and how wrong Lucas was about many things. And the Prince has bred this city to be different from others; I can’t deny her approach has led to less violence than other cities.”

Fiona burst into laughter and punched him in the arm. “Ye won’t be celibate anymore?”

“I was never voluntarily celibate, Fiona. It just… never came up.”

Again, more laughter, and another punch in his arm. “In my home town, my neighborhood, folk are kind of prudish. Just a wee bit. But ‘ere, I’ve been ‘ere one year and I’ve seen folk fucking in public places or in the window, almost every week! The folk in this town are so loose! Shameless!”

“Yes, Lucas felt he had much work to do, and that work evaporated in the fifty years he slept.” And Damien didn’t feel like that was a bad thing anymore. Not necessarily good either. God, every day for him was frustrating without a simple guide, simple direction to follow. The pains of being forced to use his brain and think about things. Ugh.

“Well if ye’r looking to expand yer boundaries, I do suggest ye get laid. In fact, from what Triss says about the Kiss, you could go to a club’s back room, and just swim in sex!”

“… you are a demon,” he said. Half serious, half kidding, but Fiona didn’t seem offended at all.

“I was a bit prudish, before Vrall and I become one. I can see memories drifting, hazy images, folk in groups, naked, touching and fucking and smoking herbs and drinking strange liquids. Folk that… worshiped me.”

“Wait… what?”

“Aye! Strange isn’t it? But I can definitely remember it. I can remember the jungle, the heat and sweat, the moans. I can remember folk locking legs in front of me and spilling juices. I can remember Vrall, eight legs and all, being bathed in sex.”

Well, he could see how someone could be attracted to Vrall. She was a monster, but a lot of her monster figure was an accented form of human curves.

“Did she eat any of these worshipers?”

“Na. Far as I can mind, she never hurt any of them. She hunted local tribes who didn’t believe her. Found the mean ones, the ones that bullied or killed other tribes. Fed on them. She had a body, like I do now, and she’d leave the dream, leave her orgies and followers, and pretend to be an innocent lass. Other tribes would be more than willing to rape her, capture her, hurt her, and she’d feast on them.”

Ok, maybe not such a naive young girl. But at the same time, she was. Having another’s memories inside your mind was not something he could understand.

“And now?” he said.

“Wha?”

“You said you were prudish, before Vrall came to you.”

“Oh! Damien Damien, aren’t ye nosy?” She beamed up at him, and wiggled her eyebrows. “I admit, in my hunts I’ve come across a few interesting corners of the town. Told myself I was just looking for more minging folk, got involved in some places where bastards might be. But often times, it was a perfectly innocent hole in the wall filled with sex. I may have stuck around to watch… a few times. Maybe did a wee more than watch once or twice. Maybe I’ll take you sometime? Found strange places, unusual places just… overflowing with sex. Unnatural even, folk just throwing themselves into these orgies. Felt like the sort of place Vrall used to hang out in.”

“Unnatural?”

“Aye! Folk just donder into the room, and like they passed through a magical, invisible gate, they take off their clothes and join the arms and legs. And I admit, it worked on me. Felt… familiar too, like something Vrall had enjoyed.”

Damien ran his fingers along the bald half of his head before combing his long hair down the haired side. “That… sounds familiar. Tony, and then Lucas, used a place where a leader’s voice was compelling. More compelling than it should have been. The Prince said the same. Maybe another place exists, with similar influence?”

“Na leaders there, just a lot of legs.”

“Still, the way you describe it sounds similar. Hidden influence.” Sex holes were a thing, he knew that. Fifty years skulking around South Side and mostly Devil’s Corner, he’d stumbled upon such places. He let them be, never went into them. Of all the sins he would punish kine for, guide them away from, people having sex with each other never seemed like one worthy of such treatment. Or, seeing people together like that just made him too uncomfortable to approach.

He never told Lucas that.

“Hidden influence. There could be something to that, aye. We should investigate later! I’ll get ye laid in the most glorious way.”

God help him.

“Like you did?”

“Hey! Just a couple times. Vrall had orgies in her past! And she’s me.” She giggled and jumped around in front of him. Ancient entity, or silly young girl? Leaning far more toward silly young girl when she was outside of her lair. “It’s been a long while since I’ve been in these tunnels. I wonder if something’s happened since I left.”

“Maybe.”

“Aye. Maybe something’s happened down ‘ere since then, and that’s why the werewolves came?”

A coincidence? No chance in Hell. But, he nodded, and continued on.

“Have you fed since last time?”

“Na, nae since the Prince said I need to lighten up. I am very hungry. I can feel myself, Vrall, clawing at the walls, looking for food. I—”

He stopped. She stopped. They glanced at each other, and then back to the darkness ahead of them. It wasn’t totally dark yet; the black tunnels were still a ways ahead. So as the group of men and women came out of the darkness, the glares and frowns on their faces were obvious. Very obvious. Six people dressed in typical street clothes, some ripped jeans and shirts and tank tops, some tattoos and some piercings. They looked normal. They did not feel normal.

“Who are you two?” A black woman came forward, long black hair, slightly tall, and sharp features. And like all the members of her group, she looked very fit; the jeans and tank top left little to the imagination.

Fiona gulped, loudly, and leaned up to Damien’s shoulder. “That’s them.”

Yeah, he figured.

“I’m Damien. This is Fiona.” His sword was along his back under his coat; a quick flick of the wrist and arm and he’d have it out, but he kept it sheathed for now. Far as he could tell, the werewolves carried no weapons, and their clothes offered little place to hide any. They were confident in their hand-to-hand combat then.

“Stephanie.” She came closer, and closer, swagger to her step and curvy hips. An attractive woman to be sure, confident, and her dark brown eyes stared into him with all the intent and aggression of an animal whose territory had been violated. “You a vamp? Don’t smell human.” She came closer again, until she was only a few feet from him, and took a long sniff. “Definitely a vamp.”

“Then you must be the werewolves I’ve heard so much about,” he said. Fiona said nothing, but she’d drifted closer to his side, until her shoulder was nudging against his arm.

“We’re famous? Sweet.” She looked over her shoulder to her pack. “Hear that Mason? Fucking famous.”

Someone in the back shrugged and leaned against one of the concrete walls of the tunnel. “Suppose that makes you happy,” the man said.

“Careful,” another man said. “Careful with… with them. With her.”

Damien leaned around Stephanie a little to get a glimpse of the new talker; another tall, muscled man like many in their pack, but this one refused to make eye contact with Damien, or with anyone around him. His eyes drifted and snapped around on the tracks beneath him, but never at anyone’s eyes.

“David says be careful with you.” Stephanie leaned down toward the short Scot, and tilted her head to the side. “Why’s that?”

“I dinnae ken.” Fiona looked up at the wolf, then around her and at the squirming man in the distance. “Looks pure barry.” Sarcasm dripped from her tongue.

Everyone raised an eyebrow at her, Damien included. The fuck did pure barry mean? Fiona snirked, catching onto everyone’s confusion; and refused to enlighten anyone.

Stephanie took a long sniff, and a sneer started to form, along with some growl sounds. “You’re not human, and you don’t smell like a dead girl.”

Another of the wolves walked up from the pack. Normal height, with tanned skin and box braid hair. “I’m Clara,” she said. Where Stephanie gave them nothing but sneers and growls, this Clara person seemed to at least offer a smile. “You’re awfully close to our hunting grounds. And I assume you’ve been told about them, so no excuses. Leave.”

“Clara… you in charge?” he said.

“Second in charge.” She shrugged and folded her arms across her chest. So casual for someone in such a position. “Avery isn’t here.”

“Clara then. We aren’t under Devil’s Corner yet, not quite. We haven’t violated your demand.”

“Demand, heh.” Stephanie stepped in closer to Fiona again, and glared down at her. “I’m more interested in why David’s got a problem with her. You don’t smell like a vampire, but you don’t feel like a human. And,” she took another long whiff, “you smell… weird.”

“And ye smell rank.” Fiona took a step back. Or she tried to, but Stephanie’s hand snapped out to grab her wrist and yank her back toward her.

Fiona punched her.

Damien jumped as Stephanie fell backward ten feet. Fiona hit hard. It wasn’t just the little girl punching the big bad wolf, it was the thing inside her too. Vrall. For a moment, just a second or two, the colossal shape of the enormous spider goddess appeared, gargantuan legs erupting from Fiona’s back as her fist collided with Stephanie’s chest. And along with her human fist was Vrall’s open palm, three claws, that slammed into the werewolf and sent her flying.

“What the fuck!” Clara jumped back over to Stephanie, and the rest of the pack joined her. They picked the woman back up to her feet, and Stephanie took a moment to get her bearings. But she had no balance, not with spiderweb wrapping her arms tight to her torso.

Fuck.

“Dangerous! Dangerous. Spider, she-spider.” David came closer, and the others came with him. “Spider, she-spider.”

“Damien,” Clara said, and she came up to him with a growl and sneer just like Stephanie’s. “Get away from her.”

“What? Why? She’s no threat to you.” He started to back up, and drew his sword as he did. The blade grabbed their eyes for a second, but only one, before their gazes fell back to the little woman beside him. She even hid behind his arm, but when he looked down at her, she had her own sneer on her face. If she was afraid, he couldn’t tell; she looked more excited than anything.

“Because,” Stephanie said as she waddled over to them, arms still trapped in the webbing around her, “she’s Azlu.”

And then her arms were no longer trapped. Damien’s eyes went wide, and he drew his pistol in his other hand. But he continued backing up, and his eyes continued to widen, as the werewolves began to transform.

Fur overtook their clothes, and their clothes disappeared in the growing, overwhelming mass of muscle. Claws replaced their fingernails. Their hair changed, warped, turned into manes of different sizes along their enormous necks. Some of them had a couple beads in braids dangling from their manes. Others kept necklaces of string with teeth or talons dangling from their now enormous necks. All of them now with wolf heads twice the size of any wolf’s.

He kept backing up. Fiona had frozen, but he pushed against her with his sword arm. Keep going, keep going. Slowly.

They were getting taller. The large muscles they’d already sported were now gargantuan walls of meat and strength. Some were eight feet tall, some nine, one of them ten. Their ears rose into points, and their mouths elongated into snouts with teeth bared. All semblance of their human gaze faded away, replaced with animal eyes, wolf eyes.

Fiona gulped again. He did too.

“Go. Kindred. Leave.” The one that was Stephanie towered over them, and made a few attempts to brush off the webbing stuck to her arms. She wasn’t bound anymore, but it was sticky stuff. “Leave girl here.” Her voice was a snarled mess of deep growls and heavy slurs.

Good God, she was massive. She was haunched forward, like she’d start running on all fours at any moment, and a few drops of drool fell from her chops.

Run. Get the fuck out. The beast in his chest freaked, screeching in all the blind fear he expected of a scared, tiny animal before the wolf. Vitae jolted through his limbs, demanded he run. His weight pressed into the balls of his feet, and he forced himself to stop shaking as he took another step back.

All of them had changed, and all of them were glaring at Fiona. The light caught in their eyes, reflected it slightly. Twelve eyes in the dark coming closer, and closer.

“What is Azlu?” he said. Should be running. Could he run with Fiona next to him? Mekhet were fast, but Fiona probably wasn’t. Probably.

“No talk! Azlu. Must. Kill.” Clara, or what was left of Clara, stomped toward them, in close, and growled as she lowered her head. A giant wolf’s head to match her absurdly massive body. “Go.”

He gulped. Like staring into a volcano. Way too close, way way too close.

“Wait, please,” he said, “Fiona’s done nothing to harm you. You have to explain why—”

Claws came down toward him, massive. For a flash moment, he thought he was looking at Jessy, and those enormous claws she’d attacked him with a lifetime ago. Claws big enough to cleave him into pieces. And this time they had what must have been six hundred pounds of muscle and strength behind them.

He jumped back. Her claws crashed against the concrete beneath him and tore through the metal of the tracks. The tunnel rumbled with the heavy impact, and the following roar of anger vibrated his bones and skin as it echoed. She was fast. He was faster.

He used his sword hand to grab Fiona’s jacket, and threw her back as the other wolf Stephanie jumped at her. The wolf’s immense body slammed both sets of claws against the tracks beneath them, and she tore through the metal and concrete with all the rage of Goliath.

“Stop! We must speak!” he said, but they weren’t listening. The other four werewolves broke into sprints, each of them a hulking mass of death and snarls.

He glanced behind him. Poor Fiona, he’d thrown her a good distance, some ten feet, and she’d landed in a roll over the tracks. Hopefully she didn’t break a bone.

Mistake, glancing back. Clara followed her swipe with another, and this time he wasn’t so fast dodging. Or she was getting faster. How could something that huge move that quickly? He’d danced around Jessy when she had gone full Gangrel psycho on him—no, not entirely true. Jessy had managed to cut into him. And Clara managed to cut him too, her claws finding his chest and tearing through it skin deep.

And just like Jessy’s monstrous claws, the werewolf’s claws did more than just cut cleanly, they burned. Like fire. Like fucking acid. He screamed as he jumped back to land beside Fiona, and grabbed at his chest. It was worse than Jessy’s claws, more like someone had taken a chainsaw to his ribs. Four long gashes ran down the chest of his shirt. His thick, Kindred blood held to Clara’s claws, but there was enough of it for a couple large droplets to splatter on the dark concrete beneath them.

The six beasts charged.

Fiona got back to her feet. He reached out for her to try and grab her, turn, run, get the fuck away, but she pushed his hand aside, and swiped her palm across the air.

In a flash of spider limbs, an eruption of white covered the wall. Damien jumped back again, gasping, eyes snapping left and right as the thick vines attached like living ropes to the tunnel walls. And when they tightened, they made a sound like metal.

A spider web.

The wolves crashed into it, and it stopped them. All of them, all six of them came to a halt as their fangs, claws, and mass collided with the wires of white. Some of the white wires yanked on the concrete bricks that lined the tunnel walls, and several of the bricks ripped free of their holds where the spider webbing was attached to them. The werewolves howled and roared, clawed and bit at the webbing, but they weren’t going anywhere.

Or at least, they weren’t for a few seconds. Clara snarled at Fiona, stared straight at her, and opened her palms wide before her claws began to glow a subtle crimson. Struggling against the white rope that stuck to her fur and wrapped around her the more she struggled, her claws found the webbing, and began to cut through it.

What the fuck.

“Come on!” Fiona grabbed his wrist, and started running. “Ye ken the way down to the maintenance tunnel below ‘ere? We can get back to my lair from there!”

Lair? Lair! He scooped the tiny girl up into his hands, and started running. The werewolves wouldn’t be able to get into her dream lair. Probably.

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~~Antoinette~~

It was the third night since the meeting. The third night without talking to Jack, her love and joy. It was killing her.

The Primogen meeting had gone about as well as expected, at least until the Fiona girl came in. All of Antoinette’s hatred for Azamel rose to the surface rather suddenly when the beast in her gut had jumped up and bared its teeth at the monster. The reaction had been abrupt, and she wasn’t prepared for it, the strange presence of a Begotten, the way they dripped of something primordial and unknowable.

She had not been kind to Fiona, none of the Primogen had. And she saw how it upset her love. Fiona seemed like the friendly sort, the sort to shatter ice with her warm personality and joyful voice, and it had worked on Jack all too well. Manipulation? Unlikely, given her young age, but it did not change that Jack had become friends with the Begotten. And that terrified her.

Antoinette sat in the depths of her tower, the chandelier of blue flames lit, and her table covered in objects and laptops and devices calibrated to see ephemera, once lit by the blue. It was difficult to focus on her research and resume delving into the secrets hidden in Twilight. Twilight, a silly word to describe the hidden things in their world. She hated it, hated such dogma, hated how the Uratha held such things as sacred or as secrets to be kept. Knowledge of the world should be shared.

Fools. They would never understand how important it was for them to work together and share what they knew. In a hundred years when human kind would be colonizing Mars, when space stations would become vast cities, and the Earth could no longer hide their kind easily, what would rigid beasts like Uratha do? Let alone the Begotten, and their hungers.

“P-Prince.” Natasha stepped into the laboratory, dressed in her usual business suit. Though, instead of pants, she wore a skirt that stopped at the knee, some pantyhose to darken her legs, and her suit jacket actually sported some cleavage. It looked delightful on her small body and tiny curves. Perhaps someone or something had awakened her sexual awareness, or appetite.

“Vola, you look charming.”

“I d-do? Thank you, I… I uh, have been… trying to expand m-my wardrobe.”

“Oh? Then please, if you ever wish for aid in such matters, I would be glad to provide assistance. You are a dragon now, Vola, which means I can help you in many ways. And your sire has as much interest in fashion as a rock.” Antoinette could — and did — dress her ghouls in many fashions for fun, but to play such games with a Kindred, one with many decades under her belt, could prove especially fun indeed.

“D-Daniel is… yes, he is… trench coat man,” she said. The two of them laughed; it was true after all. Natasha looked around a few times, no doubt coming to terms with her sire’s absence once more. If she knew where Antoinette had sent him, she would have been upset. Best to keep such matters a secret, even from her new student.

“Did you bring the object I asked for?”

“Yes Prince. It… it took some thinking, t-t-to find what you wanted. But I found an old necklace, one that I wore a lot in… that time. A gift from… my parents.” Vola walked over to her and set the necklace down on the table in front of Antoinette. “It holds a lot of memory. Reminds me of that time… b-b-before the embrace.”

Perfect.

“Thank you, Natasha. Your necklace will be unharmed, I am sure, but be prepared for the unexpected. What we are about to do is dangerous.”

“D-Dangerous?” Her brows furrowed, and she looked across the table of objects and devices, the room and its symbols drawn into the floor, and toward the center of the symbols where she no doubt anticipated her necklace would be placed.

“Indeed. Come.” Antoinette picked up the necklace with all the care of a great artifact, one tablet as well, and walked toward the center of her laboratory. “The ghostly images we expose with the help of these devices from the Ordo Dracul are ephemera. Ghosts, though more often, the shadow of them and their passing.”

“Those s-scary occult objects are possessed by ghosts?”

“Not exactly. These tools allow us to see the scars. You could think of them as the echoes of events, in much the same way ghosts are the echoes of people.” Such wonder and terror the Ordo Dracul had shown her long ago when she joined the order, centuries ago in Europe. All a blur now, faded hazy memories.

“Daniel discussed ephemera with me, but I’ve… I don’t know. These words feel weightless. I just see… images of things. They respond, s-s-sure, but—”

“Yes. You are a skeptic, Natasha Vola, and I appreciate that. I value that.” She pat the tiny girl on the shoulder, smiled down at her, and took the final steps into the center of the enormous symbol upon the floor. “Come.” Sitting down on the floor on the side of her leg, she set the necklace upon its center as Natasha sat next to her.

“I d-don’t understand. My necklace, I… it’s just a necklace.”

“From your parents. And your parents, they cared for you?”

“… yes. They… my disappearance, it killed them.”

The dark side of being embraced. Many thought it was becoming an immortal blood leech doomed to never see the sun that drove many Kindred to depression. But the harshest reality was the life you had to leave behind. Many left a cut in the world, others left a crater.

“I am sorry for your loss, Vola, I truly am. But, perhaps, this will provide you with a… comfort, of a sort.”

“You’re n-not going to show me my p-p-p-parents, are you?”

“No, nothing so macabre.” She pulled the tablet onto her lap, and used it to dim the lights, increase the power of the chandelier, and begin resonance level: light. Nothing to startle Natasha, not yet.

A quiet hum filled the room, a gentle and soothing sound. A familiar sound. She smiled as the hum filled her, and Natasha, and as the Mekhet made her own smile similar to Antoinette’s, the Prince set the tablet aside. At level light, the resonance level was far from dangerous despite what she told her subordinate, but it was wise to instill caution in the woman.

“Are we w-w-waiting for something?”

“Oui.” She pat Vola on the shoulder, and resumed waiting, smile on her face unwavering. It took time, sometimes hours, but she doubted it would take as long this time, not for something as simple and powerful as what Natasha’s necklace held.

The room was a constant blue, and even with the chandelier at full power, the room was dim. Bright enough for Kindred though. And more important, dim enough for the subtleties to show through.

“We d-don’t need the filter lens?” Natasha said.

“It would spoil the surprise. Just wait.”

And wait they did, thirty minutes at that. Natasha did not seem to believe anything would happen without the device to look through and the filter it provided. If Antoinette fetched it now, no doubt it would have exposed the swirling ephemera growing, and the essence that filled the room that began to resonant since she turned on the resonance device. There was far more to the vibrations than mere kinetic vibration, but those were secrets for another time for her little assistant.

Color. Movement. Natasha gasped as a flutter of orange trickled through the air before vanishing, leaving behind a small cloud of glowing amber dust that faded moments after. But, as Natasha stared at the tiny spark of color in the dark blue of the room, another appeared. It fluttered again for a few moments, moved through the air several inches above the necklace, before disappearing again.

“What… w-what’s….”

“I do not know what will come through the Gauntlet, Natasha. But I can open the door, and unique to these wisps of ephemera, make the door more appealing to… certain manifestations. That is what your necklace is for.”

“My n-n-necklace? I… oh!” The wisp appeared again, and fluttered its wings a couple times before settling upon the necklace.

A butterfly. It glowed amber, orange, and varying shades of red against the blue of their surroundings. It was a small thing, only an inch in size, but its wings glowed with a subtle brilliance that covered several feet around them in its light. Its wings’ patterns changed and swirled with time, slow and gentle, and it fluttered its wings in a leisurely dance, each beat causing the swirling designs to change faster between its motions, only to slow down when it stopped.

“Beautiful,” Antoinette said.

“Wh… what am I… looking at?”

“Something alive, in its own, unique way.”

“… n-not a ghost?”

“No. Indeed, it is not.”

Another butterfly wisped into existence, larger than the other, and set itself to the floor near the necklace. Antoinette smiled down at the lovely creature, and reached out with her hand before setting her fingers down on the floor beside it. It did not react, at first, but eventually, it fluttered its wings a few more times, and hovered over to her knuckles. And from there, it turned to face her, its body and face of gentle flickering amber without features, only subtle, swirling lines of black within the glow.

She felt it, a soft warmth, as if the glow it emitted was a blanket to wrap around her and cocoon her. Such silly, poetic thoughts, and yet those were the thoughts that flooded her as the creature turned around a few times on her hand. Another butterfly of amber appeared, as large as the one before, and it fluttered close to its friend. But, with her free hand, Antoinette blocked its path with a slow and soft wave, and ushered it toward Natasha.

The poor girl was stunned. Her eyes were wide and jaw dropped. She’d have asphyxiated for lack of breathing were she human.

“These creatures were beckoned by your necklace, Natasha.”

With shaking limbs, the girl raised her hands palm up and together, and stared at the butterfly of waving reds and oranges as it settled onto her hands. She gasped once it touched her, as if life had just forced its way into her chest.

“It… it’s… warm! And I f-feel… it….”

“I have summoned several entities with this technique. But never have I summoned something as… gentle, and loving, as this.”

“My necklace… I… this….” Natasha brought the butterfly closer to her, hands cupping it like a large bowl. It did not fly away. As it came closer to her, it fluttered its wings, and several waves of amber filled the air around her, wisps of color that fell over Natasha and again earned a gasp from her. “It’s… it’s the… the same f-f-feelings I… in my memory, when Mom and Dad… gave me the necklace.”

“Can you describe the feeling?” She felt it too, but it was a feeling so long forgotten she could not describe it as anything more beyond a warm cocoon.

Natasha lowered her hands, and looked at her with the heaviest eyes. “It’s… it’s hazy. So long ago, b-b-but… it’s… the feeling… when you’re in bed, and you’re going to sleep, and your parents come in. They… they tuck you in, kiss you goodnight, and… and….”

“You miss your parents.”

“… I do.”

Antoinette sighed, and motioned forward, back to the center of the symbol. The butterfly left her hand and rejoined the smaller one by the necklace. “I must apologize, Natasha. I could not be sure what was summoned, and this was… perhaps, painful.”

“No! No no, this is b-beautiful, and… it’s… it’s so—”

Giggling cut her off. Natasha blinked at her, and Antoinette her in return, before the two of them looked back to the circle.

Another wisp of color appeared in the blue over the necklace. And with it, another giggle, childlike. The butterflies started to hover around the necklace, and their colors shined all the brighter as they circled it and each other. Until another wisp of color, something white and golden, swallowed them up.

“W-What?” Tasha backed up, sliding her butt across the floor. “What’s going on?”

Antoinette peered into the growing streaks of gold and white, squinted for a moment as a burst of light flooded them, and then pulled back a couple feet like Tasha as light began to settle

“Hello,” the light said. A girl’s voice, maybe six years old. Bright. Innocent.

“… hello,” Antoinette said.

“Hello,” it said again. No longer just a sheen of light, it looked like an orb, perhaps made of glass and only a few inches in diameter, glowing white. From behind the orb, two wings were flapping in slow, deep waves, angel wings that glowed gold, each maybe three feet long.

Tasha got onto her palms and knees, and crawled forward a little to get in closer to the hovering orb. “I… what… who are you?”

The orb drifted closer to Tasha, and flapped its wings hard enough to make her hair move with the gentle breeze. “I’m Safe.”

“Safe?” Tasha said.

“Safe.” The orb hovered around Tasha, over her, and bits of golden dust fell from its wings onto her body. They faded, but only once they glowed extra bright upon contact. “Do you feel safe?”

“I… yes… that’s the word. That’s the word I needed t-t-to… describe… the feeling.”

Safe. This creature was Safe.

“Hello!” it said. “Please, be safe. I’ll keep you safe.”

“You are a young spirit, are you not?” Antoinette smiled at the unusual creature, and reached out to poke its glass-like body. It was not glass, but something warm, and somewhat soft.

“I am! And this place, I’ve seen this place. Before it was different, and there were different things here. Not safe. Now it’s safe. Are you safe? Big walls here, must be safe.” It hovered over Antoinette as well, and over her, large wings covering her in its glow. “I’ll keep you safe. Do you feel safe?”

She did. A long forgotten sensation to feel safe, and one paranoid Kindred often never felt, ever, even in the depths of underground tunnels surrounded by metal and vault doors and security. But under this creature’s radiance, she did feel safe, to an unnatural degree. The entity made her feel safe by proximity then, or was it the strange glowing dust that fell from its wings? Or was it all a mere trick of the light?

“I do. Thank you, Safe.”

“That’s good!” Again it giggled, and started to drift around the two women in a slow figure-eight. “In the Hisil, this area is not safe! It’s tall, and big, and strange, and chaotic. But then you did something, and I came.”

Antoinette smiled. Chaotic indeed. Her experiments must have unbalanced the world in the other realm every time she performed them.

“Is… is this the first time… you’ve s-s-summoned something that’s talked?” Tasha said.

“No. I have encountered other such spirits.”

“Spirits… spirits… I… it’s hard t-to….”

To accept that spirits exist. Such thoughts were long past for Antoinette, but there was a time long ago when she felt the same.

“The wolves would keep this world secret from us.” She reached out for the spirit, and it fluttered over her hand. The strange orb landed upon her palm, and giggled again. It was not just Safe, it was something slightly different, or perhaps more specific. Something her city contained, something the necklace resonated with.

The safety a child felt with their parents. Were the spirit older, it would not have been something as simple and delightful as the little angel sitting on her hand. Perhaps it would develop into a monstrous size, with six wings, and the sphere of its body would grow strong, and envelop all it wished to keep safe.

But for now, Safe was simple little thing, and adorable.

“It pleases me that such spirits exist within my city.” It was a haven for Kindred after all, and other monsters apparently. For such spirits to exist perhaps reflected on the state of her city, or nearby areas. That well of knowledge, all beyond her reach. She could do nothing but prod at it with her experiments, and hope to stumble upon new secrets.

“Yes yes! The blood tower is strange! It can be spooky and scary, but sometimes not. I can’t keep things safe here! Normally. But tonight it’s safe. Are you safe?”

“I… I’m safe,” Tasha said. “W-Why did… what called you here?”

“Blood tower changed! The locus here is very small, and weird, and it disappears and changes. Today it’s new! And warm. And safe. I must become bigger, keep it safe. Don’t change it! I can feed here, and keep it safe and get bigger and keep it safe.”

Antoinette sighed, long, heavy, and ushered the beautiful angel toward Tasha again, who put out her hands to catch it. The little girl’s eyes were wide with wonder now, no longer shocked, absorbed in the beauty of what she was holding, the expression so clear on her face it reminded Antoinette of Jack.

“I am sorry, Safe, but the locus will disappear soon. You will have to go back to your realm.”

“… ok. But stay safe!” Its wings settled as the spirit nestled into Natasha’s hands, and it pressed them to her chest. “You too? You seem nice. I’ll protect you.”

From how Tasha was looking at the lovely creature, if she had been blushing life she would have cried a river of tears.

“D-Don’t worry… I’ll be safe.”

Oh, poor Vola. Antoinette would have cried as well if she were blushing, just for the proximity to such eyes. No doubt the spirit was stirring her memories, as it was her necklace, carrying her emotions embedded upon its body due to years of wear. Perhaps Antoinette’s request for a personal object was misguided.

But, Natasha was smiling.

Antoinette reached over for the tablet, and disabled the resonance. As it began to fade, Safe began to fly higher, and giggled its sweet little sound, before it too faded away as the hum completely silenced.

“This was perhaps an error on my part, Natasha Vola.” She got up, fixed her skirt, and walked back to the wall by the main equipment to turn the lights back on. Only her, her subordinate, and the necklace in the laboratory. “This equipment is a gift from the Ordo Dracul to pursue the secrets I yearn to discover, but there are many unknowns, forces you could even describe as magical. Such a disgusting word, but here we are, summoning creatures from beyond the Gauntlet and our understanding. So, in my infinite ignorance, I test it, and test what lies beyond. Your… your necklace, summoned something that existed in that place, Natasha. And it was quite beautiful.”

“Wow.” The little Mekhet got up, grabbed her necklace, and held it in her hand with all the delicacy of holding one of Antoinette’s ancient relics. Like a precious flower. “It… it was… wow.”

“Your eyes remind me of Minerva’s eyes, the first time I brought her here. She would say you are cute as a button.”

“Minerva? I never did learn about her, b-b-but she’s… I hear… things.”

“It is a sensitive topic for Jacob, so we let him share the information if he wishes, and otherwise do not spread it. But, I must warn you since you are now a member of the Ordo Dracul and working for me, that… she was an overzealous member of the order. She spent many years in this room when these tools were still new, experimented, desperate to understand things.”

“I d-don’t understand. Some Uratha told me… that Avery k-killed Minerva, and that… Jacob and she were an item. B-B-But I… what happened?”

“Minerva found a way to pursue these interests outside of my tower. I do not know how; the Uratha destroyed the evidence. She tried to stop them….” She sighed, and sat down at the table to begin examining the many artifacts before her. “She was Jacob’s lover, Miss Vola, and I believe they could have lived centuries together, in love, if fate had been on their side.”

Better for everyone she not bring up how she had tried to stop Minerva, encouraged her to only practice such dangerous experiments in the safety of the tower where they could control the parameters, to stay with Daniel or Antoinette who were much older and stronger than her. The girl’s death was partly Antoinette’s own fault; do not speak ill of the dead.

“Oh….” Vola sat down across from her, head lowered, shoulders heavy, and she slipped the necklace back into her pocket as her eyes drifted over the objects in much the same way Antoinette’s did. “The Uratha are… brutal, and m-m-mean… some of them.”

“Some of them?” Antoinette leaned in closer and eyed her little helper. Cute as a button indeed, Natasha looked down, up, left and right, every direction except the Prince’s. “Judging from how you described your encounter, I had expected you to consider them all quite vicious.”

“They were! A-And they were… terrifying. But Arturo and Matthew were nice, after.” A tiny grin sneaked its way onto her face, only to vanish once Natasha shook her head, no doubt realizing Antoinette could see it.

“Natasha, if I did not know better, I would think you found these two werewolves intriguing.”

“I… I uh… I t-told you they let me feed, right? I… didn’t tell you, that they… um….”

“Natasha Vola, did you Kiss a werewolf?” For all her attempts at being serious about the matter, the line sounded too silly to keep a straight face even for her, and Antoinette chuckled with its conclusion.

“I… did. They offered! Sort of. And… Art was… r-r-really… really tasty.”

Drinking the blood of an Uratha. She had to admit, she had never done such a thing. Her interactions with wolves were limited; they rarely came to Dolareido, and Antoinette had spent nearly half her life in the city. Before, hundreds of years ago, she had interacted with the Uratha, but she could not for the unlife of her remember the details. Always a blur, always a haze memories from such a time. But, if she had Kissed a werewolf, she would surely have remembered it.

“I see a twinkle in your eye, Miss Vola.”

“T-Twinkle?”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, leaned in, and set her elbows on the table before setting her chin on her knuckles, fingers netted together. “Yes, the twinkle a young woman gets when her mind wanders, and she imagines a certain person presenting her with flowers, or a love poem, or in this modern era, a text.”

Aha. The girl twitched, and her gaze cast down even as her shoulders came forward and her arms wrapped around herself. Defensive, no doubt feeling exposed. Then Antoinette had struck a chord, and Natasha’s imagination had indeed been pondering someone.

“Come now Natasha, I am five hundred years old and have dealt with romance in all its forms.”

“… all?”

“All.” The Prince smiled over her hands at her little assistant. “While I do not enjoy the implication this story of yours carries, it is true that the previous pack of wolves to arrive in my city were under a different leader. If what Jack tells me is true, only Avery is the returning party, so whoever it is that has attracted your flights of fancy, I do not know them. And, as you say, they let you feed from them. I must consider that perhaps they are not the angry dogs I dealt with before.”

“They… they’re b-b-brutal, and d-dangerous! Their claws felt like f-fire on my skin, and their speed and strength… their animal hunger. It was… t-t-t-terrifying. But, after, when they calmed, Art and Matt, they… they were… they flirted with me.” A confident statement from her shy, stuttering little friend.

“Flirted? That must have been… thrilling.” Antoinette set her hands down and leaned in closer. “In truth, Miss Vola, it has been decades since I have had a friend to speak with about simple, fun, silly things, such as flirting. Minerva was the last.” And she did miss her, but it had been many decades since the woman’s death. Antoinette had moved on. Jacob had not. And as much as Antoinette loved her precious ghouls, they were not Kindred.

“Are… are you… asking me t-to be… your friend?” Natasha’s eyes were wider than the Prince thought possible.

“Oui… why does that shock you so?”

“B-B-B-B-B-Because you’re the Prince, and you’re… you!”

Antoinette laughed and shook her head before leaning back. She pulled much of her hair over her shoulder, and combed its long, white waves with her fingers over her chest.

“You and Jack have much in common, Miss Vola.” Shyness and jitteriness among them. “Both of you view me as a monolith. And that is my own doing; I am to blame. I must be such to be the Prince of this city, to rule its denizens and protect them from their bloodlust. But do not forget I am Kindred, as you are, and a woman, as you are.” She smiled with the word, woman, knowing full well Natasha viewed the Prince as her total opposite, mentally and physically. Such a comparison was inaccurate, lacking nuance, and perhaps she could show her little friend the error of her ways.

“W-What… would you… want to uh… t-talk about?”

“Why you of course. My ghouls are a delight to gossip with, but it is not the same as speaking with fellow Kindred.” Again she combed her hair, as the motion seemed to draw Natasha’s eyes, and settled her fidgeting. Normal women played with their hair, not monolithic Prince’s that decided the fates of Kindred every day. “I am not Daniel, and you will find me a delight to speak with if you wish to.”

“Gossip, gossip… um… uh….”

“I will start, if you are still nervous.” She had only one thing on her mind after all, and she ached to speak of it. “I am very worried about Jack, Miss Vola. His new role as intermediary for the Uratha has put him in a prime position to be hurt, or suffer from the anger of the wolves, or mine. And his friendship with Fiona, a Begotten, is another strain.” She sighed, and used a thick group of hair to tickle her chin with its soft ends.

“I hang out w-with Jack, sometimes.”

“Truly?”

“Yeah. And… and I know you have nothing t-t-to worry about, Prince. He really… loves you.”

Like someone had taken the weight of worlds from her shoulders. Antoinette sighed, long, content, and resumed combing her hair as she folded one leg over the other.

“I do hope you are right, Natasha, about not having to worry. And if you are becoming his friend, then please, keep an eye on him would you, for me, s'il vous plaît? I trust him, but… well, you were there when Lucas attacked. The boy has a habit of getting in the middle of things.”

Natasha giggled, and smiled a mischievous little smile. “He does.”

“So, Natasha Vola, you believe some rather dangerous, and I assume fit, powerful, handsome werewolves have been flirting with you?”

“Y-Yes. And… and they visited me, last night.”

“Visited by the wolves. Do tell.” A little push for her little subordinate, to loosen her tongue.

“Well, Arturo and M-M-Matthew visited… and they like to flirt with me. I thought they were t-teasing me, but… I don’t know now. They… they smile at me and look me up and down and Art is a sneaky b-bastard and Matt a gentle giant. They’re close friends.”

Two wolves flirting with Natasha, two friends at that. Antoinette smiled and nodded. A similar situation to Ashley and Julee then, perhaps.

“B-But,” Vola continued, “they um… had more to t-t-t-talk about, and… warn me about.”

If only gossiping with a new friend could remain a fun and silly, relaxing activity, not devolve into more Kindred affairs. C’est la vie.

“What did the wolves say?”

“They s-said you were messing with the Gauntlet… w-w-which, I guess is true. They said that, what you’re doing is d-d-dangerous, but not a problem… yet. They said… hosts are sneaky.”

“Hosts? I believe Simon mentioned the word, but not in a way to give context. If what you say is true, then the word does indeed carry meaning. Hosts.”

“B-But if we stay out of the werewolves’ way, everything will be fine, right?”

Another sigh, another painful memory. “Perhaps, Miss Vola, perhaps. So, these two beasts came to your apartment to warn you?”

“Warn me, and… w-w-watch television.” She squirmed again, and smirked. “They’re funny guys.”

“Please, go on.” Perhaps listening to the young woman talk about her interesting new friends would take Antoinette’s mind off of Jack.

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~~Jack~~

His buzzer rang. Almost a shock, considering how many people liked to circumvent the elevator. He hopped up from the couch and pressed the button. “Yello.”

“Jack, may I come in?” Antoinette’s voice.

Jack did a double take at the buzzer. Guess she didn’t feel like circumventing tonight. “Yes, please.”

He pressed the button and waited by the door. Going to be a weird conversation. Maybe a painful conversation.

A minute later, he opened the door for her, and she offered a nod before stepping into his place and setting her suit jacket aside. Still in her power suit skirt and white blouse, she sat down at his couch, folded one leg over the other, and pulled her beautiful hair over her shoulder to begin combing it with her fingers. If he replaced it with a white cat in her arms, it’d have been hard to tell the difference.

“I… am not sure where to begin,” she said.

He sat down on the couch across from her, leaned forward with elbows on his knees, hands dangling, and shrugged. Definitely a painful conversation. “Me neither.”

“You must have questions.”

“I do. Just… figured you wouldn’t want to talk about the meeting. That was the deal, wasn’t it? We’d leave the business world at the office.”

She smiled her beautiful smile, and her heavy eyes fell down to her combing fingers. “Perhaps that was naive. I know you left the meeting upset, and I could not help but feel responsible.”

“… yeah, I was upset.” Time for a real conversation, a real-talk sort of conversation. The sort of conversations they had in romance dramas when the music stopped and the silence between words pulled the air tight with tension. “I understand having the Uratha in Dolareido again is making the Primogen upset, and I get that having to go through me with no choice in the matter is going to make everyone pissed. But the fuck did Fiona do?”

He almost yelled the last bit; it was enough to make both of them blink in surprise.

“… you have become friends with her, quite quickly.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his buzzed head and let it hang from his neck like a stone. Stop being a jackass. “She’s really nice, sociable, even with someone like me. Kind of reminds me of my sister.”

“Your sister.” Antoinette got up, and came to sit beside him. One of the few times she’d ever done that; normally he’d join her. “You do not speak of your family often, my love.”

My love. Good, good there was still that. Course it’d take more than a rocky meeting to break that, stop being so stupid.

“I told you about my mom, my dad, my sister. Just… not much to tell.”

“I… still would like to hear more,” she said, and she reached out to put an arm over his shoulders. “Later. For now, you must understand why I was harsh, why we were all harsh in the meeting.”

“Julias told me. Described the Begotten, scared me with talk about their hungers, warned me about Azamel and told me to avoid her. And… I’m only half sold, Antoinette. A lot of what he said applies to Kindred too, especially elders.” Poking the bear, comparing Kindred to Begotten. Poking the bear with a hot iron poker, specifically comparing to elders.

“That may be true, but Begotten are… difficult to gauge, little Ventrue. Athalia has done little to disturb the Masquerade, but Azamel and her hunger have caused destruction beyond my ability to hide. Until I can understand this new friend of yours, I am afraid I must be strict with her. And intimidating. A deterrent.”

“A policy of deterrence. I remember a cold war nearly coming to a very explosive end, due in no small part to that.”

“It is not the same my love. Please understand, I have ruled this city for a long time, and the beasts that roam it need to be controlled. Forcefully sometimes. Julias understood this, and he laid the truth at her feet with no illusion or room for debate, so she would know how deathly serious the Masquerade is.”

Yeah, he got that, but that wasn’t the whole issue. “The moment she stepped into the room, I could tell you all thought of her as scum.”

“… that… is perhaps true. I would not use the word scum, but it is a reality that we in Dolareido hold no love for the Begotten. They are slaves to their hunger, and many of them have hungers that are… barbaric.”

He sighed, but nodded. It hurt hearing it, but when a prejudice was backed up by real examples, it was hard to dismiss it.

“So, if she’s not a problem, like Athalia, your opinion of her will change?”

“Indeed it will.” Antoinette’s embracing arm hugged him tighter, and her hand started to rub his hair in that soft way against the grain he loved so much. “Unfortunately, I do not have the option to risk leniency.”

She made him feel like a child, and for good reason. A city to rule, with risks to take into account with every decision, and centuries of experience to guide her; that included a dislike of monsters. All he had was first impressions of Fiona, the first monster he’d ever met.

“Suppose I failed pretty hard at this,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Just… always took myself for an impartial guy, good at being logical about things. That meeting really got under my skin.”

“Jack, would you care to know a secret?” She leaned in and put her forehead to his temple, complete with some gentle nudges and soft sighs.

“I think so.”

“Those meetings grate on me as well. I must be a harsh, ruthless as you said several nights ago. People know me as such because I must be, to be Prince of this city. Please do not think of me as such when… when we are together, alone.”

He sat up straight and looked at her. It really bothered her that he might think of her as such. And hell, after seeing and hearing how they acted in their Primogen meetings, he had to admit, he gained a new appreciation for the cycled stories among neonates that the Primogen were giant assholes.

“I’m overreacting.” He leaned in toward her, and she met him with her own lean further down, so they could put their foreheads to each other. “Sorry, I’m being an ass, and a kid.”

“Perhaps. But your observations about our distaste for Begotten were accurate, little Ventrue. I do hope your observations about Fiona are accurate as well.” Her hands slipped down over his arms to find his, and she brought them together before bringing them to her lips for a kiss. “We will clash in that room in the future, no doubt, and there will be sides of each other neither of us will enjoying seeing. We were naive to think it would not follow us home, but, with soft words, we may be able to soothe our tempers and worries.”

“… you really are too damn good with words. Put me to shame.”

She kissed his knuckles again, and then his nose. “You will learn. Now, lie down.”

“Oh, ok.” He turned a bit more so he could face her, and she pushed him so his back fell to the couch, and his head rested on the couch arm. Helpless and staring up at a deadly creature—not a deadly creature. Those weren’t the tiger eyes he was used to seeing when she was looking for sex, or any of the eyes she sported when angry, or feeling playful, or commanding.

They were soft eyes tonight.

The goddess put her weight onto her elbows around his chest against the bed, and lay on top of him. So much taller than him, he could see her feet were pointed up from bent knees, and much of her body was between his legs. Her breasts pressed to his chest, and with her elbows tucked in at his sides and ribs, she was free to slide her fingers over his chin, his lips, his neck and earlobes.

“I spoke with Natasha Vola today,” she said, and kissed him. “You were a topic.”

“Uh oh.”

She chuckled and kissed him again. “She told me you would love me no matter what occurred.”

“Well… yeah.” Her worried about him not loving her, him worried about her not loving him. A couple of idiots at this point.

“Forgive a Kindred her paranoia, little Ventrue.” She let her weight collapse down on him, and buried her face in his neck. “Moments of joy are sand in my fingers.”

Ah, the old sand between the fingers parable.

“You can clutch me tight as you want you know, I’m not going anywhere.”

“… you are too good to me, my love.”

“Ha, me too good to you?” He brought his hands up to hold her, hug her tight, rub her back and squeeze the tall, voluptuous goddess to his body. “You spoil me constantly.”

“I do enjoy to spoil.” She raised her head again, and grinned down at him, her dangerous eyes returning. No matter how many times he saw those eyes, it always sent a thrill up his spine. “Shall I spoil you now?”

“I uh, I don’t have anything planned tonight. Julias might text me with a new contract I need to negotiate, but—”

“Then, since you have the time, I would very much like to spoil you some more.” She pressed her body down on him harder, purposefully squishing her breasts to his chest. Blouse and bra and his shirt couldn’t stop the wonderful feeling of her body on his. “So often we make love in my tower. We should enjoy your abode more often.”

“W-Well, I mean, my apartment isn’t nearly as majestic as the Elysium Tower.”

“But there is something comforting about an apartment, little Ventrue. A small home that feels complete.”

“Yeah, I guess there is.” That was true after all. A grand tower always felt more like visiting a mansion, than something homely.

Antoinette sat up on her knees, still between his legs, and began to undo the buttons of her blouse. In seconds, her black bra was exposed, and Jack groaned at the sight of her huge breasts contained within.

“Perhaps tonight, we can find different places for you to rest your cock between my breasts? Enjoying sex upon a bed does get old, with time. Possibly here? I could kneel on the floor, trap your cock within my bosom, and slowly bring you to orgasm over many minutes, until your white warmth drips down over my body. Or perhaps by the window? I could lie down for you on my back beside it, and you could straddle my chest, lean over me, and fuck my breasts until your cum coated my neck for everyone watching to see.”

Why was she so damn good with words? God he was going to explode in his pants and he wasn’t even blushing life yet. He—

The door opened, and a short, older woman stepped in. Avery.

The werewolf smirked, animal eyes looking the Daeva up and down. “Nice rack.”