

~~Natasha~~

Finally, they were done. Took them forever, and the worst part about it, was Tash couldn't stop watching! She watched, and watched, and by the time Eric was done with Jessy, she was an utter wreck, a trembling, mewling, worn out mess of limbs. Tash thought her sessions with the boys could get silly long and messy, but this was a whole new level of fantasy.

Eric looked down at the — mostly — naked woman on his lap, before looking at Tash again. So scary, with the huge teeth, the predator eyes, and the utterly massive muscles that his short fur did nothing to hide. He had abs. Abs! Why would a furry creature have abs? Tash stared at them, and him, and then his stomach some more, as the enormous beast lifted the exhausted girl off his length, and set her on the couch beside him.

Werewolf penis. Huge, werewolf penis, covered in—

She shook her head, hard enough to bounce her brain around in her skull, and turned her backs to them.

“Eric! You should ch-change back! And Jessy, g-g-get cleaned up! And dressed.”

Jessy laughed, voice wavering. “He’s just a big, sexy puppy, isn’t he?”

Tash rolled her eyes, but looked back over her shoulder. He was so huge, and his shaft was absolutely massive, and... werewolfy. She shook her head again and looked away.

“Sorry,” Eric said, voice changing mid word. The couch creaked and squeaked, announcing the man’s change back into human form. Once the squeaking stopped, Tash heard some shuffling. “I’ll just throw us in the shower real quick.”

Tash nodded, and moved into the kitchen. Jessy’s apartment wasn’t too dissimilar to Tash’s, just a little dirtier, but still had the usual Dolareido feel. Streamlined, blacks and silvers, everything sleek and expensive. The stools weren’t comfortable, but they were pretty; Dolareido’s motto for pretty much everything. It was better than being in the living room, where those two had made such a mess, Jessy would have to hire an Invictus cleaning crew to deal with it. They cleaned up blood, they could clean up werewolf semen. Or maybe it changed back into more reasonable amounts, when Eric changed back? Her dragon curiosity demanded she ask, and she promptly shut it up.

She glanced over her shoulder, and smiled as she got a peek of Eric's naked body from behind, as he carried Jessy in his arms. The Gangrel was still shaking all over, but smiling like a giddy school child, and she grinned at Natasha passed Eric's arm as the man took her into the bathroom.

They didn't keep her waiting long. Five minutes, enough to get all the white stuff off them, and get Jessy into something a little more comfortable and decent than a thong and nipple pasties. Jessy came back in baggy, pink pajamas, because yes, she had big pink pajamas, as if it was her personal goal to not be stereotyped. Eric came back wearing some jeans, and nothing but jeans, and Natasha peeked at his body more than a few times as they came into the large kitchen with her. He wasn't as big as Matt or Art, but that didn't mean he wasn't utterly gorgeous.

And, she couldn't help but picture the werewolf now, the huge beast, with huge... everything.

"So, Tash," Jessy said, "apparently you've been keeping secrets from me?"

Uh oh.

"Um, I—"

"Jack brought me to see Azamel a month ago. He spilled the beans there, about this whole 'dark presence' or whatever." She finger quoted dark presence, too. "Apparently, a bunch of you guys knew about this thing, and what it may or may not be doing, and have been investigating it without me. Like, Jack thinks that tear Eric and me went through to save him from that scary ghost place was this thing's doing? Etcetera, etcetera."

"Oh... Oh." She squirmed as she looked down at the countertop. "I—"

"Don't worry about it." Jessy hopped onto the stool beside her, and in typical Jessy fashion, rubbed Tash's shoulders like nothing was wrong. "I mean yeah, I was angry at first. We're best friends, and you didn't tell me this big thing? Like, fucking hell, my feelings." She touched her chest with her free hand, feigning deep offense.

Tash didn't say anything. But she did sigh and lower her head, hiding her face behind waves of her black hair. Guilt was a shitty feeling.

"But Jack, the asshole, put it in perspective. Big nasty secret like this? Made sense to keep it secret, even from me. I can be a loud person, I know that. Must have been tough on ya."

"So Jack—"

"Needed me to cover his six until Damien was healed up. And Eric"—she gestured to her boyfriend, who stood in the kitchen—"is slowly learning more about it, too. Cause, ya know, werewolf.

Spirits and shit. There's a connection somewhere there, between Black Blood, who Jack is convinced isn't a normal spirit, and the Shadow Realm and all that stuff."

"Y-Yeah." Apparently, Jack had let Jessy in on everything. Everything everything, if he told her about his concern with Black Blood. That meant Jessy had to be careful around Jacob, and not let him know that they suspected him and his so-called spirit friend.

"This what we were gonna talk about tomorrow?" Eric asked.

Jessy laughed and shrugged. "Kinda, yeah, but with Tash here, figured we should probably talk about it now."

"I'm sorry I d-d-didn't tell you, I—"

"Tash. Seriously, come on." Jessy leaned over her and hugged her. "Important shit is important. You didn't tell me cause the less people that knew, the better. Much as our friendship is important, the city at large is a little more important, right? Not like I'd be happy if our friendship got everyone killed."

She groaned. Of course Jessy had to say that, cause now all she could think about was Matt and Art.

Jessy chuckled. "I know that groan."

"N-No you don't."

"Yes I do. Tash, come on, you gotta talk to them."

"I will! With Jack. Later. W-When things are better." When Avery and the pack calmed down, healed, and hopefully wouldn't be looking for any excuse for a fight. And when Tash didn't get furious just thinking about Art staking her through the heart.

"K, well, my two cents? Jack's definitely put a more logical spin on this, and I gotta give the kid credit, he thinks with his head on straight. The boys did you wrong, but they had good reason. Give them a chance to make up for it." Jessy had said those words before, just last week actually, but now that Tash knew she'd known about the secret, and had been keeping that a secret from Tash, the words meant more. Jessy had her own, personal context now. Tash keeping a secret from her wasn't nearly as bad as what Art and Matt did to Tash, but it was still in the same ballpark.

"The P-Prince, she wants me to... to um... ask them to do something." Something she knew Avery would say no to, but would ultimately be the boys' choice, not Avery's.

It hadn't been Antoinette's idea. It'd been Natasha's. But she hadn't been serious!

Sighing, she looked at Eric again, and the man raised a brow as Natasha managed to meet his gaze. His werewolf form, the big deadly Gauru form, had been terrifying. But he'd been in control, really good control, enough that he'd managed to calm down and do exactly what Jessy wanted: show off how good they looked having sex. He really wasn't the same as the others.

“If the b-boys agree to the Prince's demand, it'll get... dangerous, for me.”

Jessy hugged her again. “Then it's a good thing you know a girl with a sexy city wolf to help you out.”

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“B-Boys have too much influence on our second lives!” She thudded her fist against the table, squeaked, snapped a hand out, and steadied one of the stranger occult objects before it fell over.

The Prince and Elaine blinked at her, looked at each other, before Elaine shrugged and returned to her typing. Antoinette chuckled, and pulled some of hair over her shoulder to comb it with her fingers, while she continued typing on her laptop with her other hand. The four women sat in the Prince's primary experiments chamber, the one with the crazy chandelier, and they had a bunch of artifacts on the table in front of them, including Elen's, and the strange necklace Antoinette had received so long ago that'd summoned a spirit, who'd warned them about Maria.

Samantha was there too, and she laughed as she held one of the strange objects, a shrunken head, and took pictures of it at different angles. Not to squeamish anymore.

“They do?”

“Yes! W-We make too many decisions, based on what the men in our lives are d-doing.” She frowned down at her laptop, closed it, and folded her arms across her chest. “I don't like that. I'm sick of it.”

The two elders grinned, knowing grins, but Samantha laughed harder, a hearty, warm sound. Samantha was fun. She didn't have the experience or wisdom of the elders, and she was nice enough to roll with whatever someone said. Natasha could say stupid things, complain about stupid things, and while Antoinette or Elaine would listen, and then offer some very valuable advice, Samantha would just listen. That was preferable, sometimes.

“Guilty,” the young Daeva said, “I mean, about making decisions with men in mind. I dunno. I just... can’t help but think about romance, when I make life choices. Maybe it’s cause I was still human, not long ago, but the idea of dying alone was pretty terrifying, you know?”

“But you are immortal now,” Antoinette said. “Age is of no concern.”

Samantha nodded. “I know. But the reflex is still there. I keep thinking: oh, what sort of apartment should I move into? Will it be big enough for a man to live there, too?”

The two elders and Tash laughed. Ok, Tash might not have been able to go a night without thinking about her boyfriends, it’d been weeks since she last spoke to them, but she didn’t frame things like that anymore. Where to live? Would she have enough money? Or the classic, what school would their kids go to? Those thoughts had long died.

“It is indeed, all relative,” Antoinette said. “We are Kindred now, and most of those instincts will slowly fade away. But the instincts were there for a reason. It is not the man who must carry a child for nine months, nor deal with nearly as much oxytocin for the child, post birth. The desire for a provider, in human women, is nothing to be ashamed of.”

Elaine nodded. “Evolution is a cruel bitch.”

The Prince grinned at her friend before looking back to Tash. “But, evolution arguments aside, do you not enjoy considering romance, in your life choices?”

Tash sighed and sat back in her seat. It was true. Much as she sometimes told herself otherwise, she liked thinking about romance, a lot. She was one of those girls who liked stupid stuff like romcoms. Watching them could be painful, cause the characters were always beyond idiotic, but still, she liked them.

“Natasha,” the Prince continued, eyeing her, “I can see where your mind wanders. Do not think less of yourself, for indulging your feminine side.”

“And consider,” Elaine said, “that masculine and feminine mentalities are not absolutes, limited to biological sex, or even opposites on a spectrum. There is overlap, and there is nuance.”

“Indeed. Both sexes are capable of both ways of thinking. Though gender proclivities do exist.” Antoinette tapped her chin, thinking. “I digress. My point is, you should feel no shame over thinking about romance more often than a man might, the same as a man should feel no shame over finding explosions so enthralling.”

Tash snorted on a giggling laugh. “I suppose.”

“When you get to our age,” Elaine said, “those old holdovers from your first life will fade into nothing. Mostly.” The two elders shared a grin. “But you will miss it. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to make any choice in my second life based on a man — or woman — I might have feelings for. I have not made such a decision in centuries.”

Antoinette nodded. “And as much as I love your son, Samantha, my goal with Dolareido is not something I would alter, simply to placate him. The city is a labor of love, mine, and I would ask Jack to consider that, in decisions we might make.”

The young Daeva nodded. “Of course. He understands that. That’s my boy for you.”

They all nodded. That was Jack. As long as what you were doing made logical sense, he’d accept it. Weird as his relationship with the Prince was, the pair really did make a strange sort of sense.

“Quite right,” Antoinette said. “And, when you reach our age, you may very well wish a man was the reason you made certain decisions.”

“Or, you know, men,” Samantha said, gesturing to Tash with a warm smile.

Tash squirmed in her seat. “You’re the one d-dating a whole covenant!”

“What? I’m not...” Samantha buried her face in her hands. “Oh god, who told you?”

Natasha laughed, reached out, and touched the woman’s elbow. “S-Sorry. But, yeah, Kindred know. Antoinette didn’t tell me either. Someone p-probably said something pretty innocent, and then someone asked more, and... yeah, information spreads.”

Samantha squirmed more, but managed to lower her hand and smile at Tash. “I’m being really dumb, aren’t I? Still being shy about stuff.”

Natasha shook her head. “It was a lot longer for me b-before I was able to, um, be a little more open about stuff. You’re ahead of me.” If it was really a race. Unlike the Prince, Natasha didn’t think sexual openness was necessarily a good thing. Not everyone had to embraces orgies.

Jessy seemed to actually be happier, now that she was having sex with one person, instead of four. Course, that one person could transform into a giant beast, and fill the girl up to the point Natasha had been thoroughly concerned something would rupture inside her. But the Gangrel liked it, and it was obvious she also really liked how blatantly dominant Eric was, when they fucked with him transformed. Girl probably liked switching it up, being in charge when Eric was in human form, and then giving in when he transformed and got those large... large... very large hands on her.

It reminded Tash of her boys. Her boys? She had no idea if they were still her boys. She hadn't spoken to them in six weeks, and it was killing her.

"I should stop being ashamed," Samantha said, smiling to herself as she took more pictures of her artifact. "It's been... a breath of fresh air. The freedom is exhilarating." She fiddled with her necklace, and after a few seconds, clutched it tight. "Mary is happy for me. She's, um, a little hard to talk to, being, you know, a ghost... And because it's so naughty! Hard to tell my daughter anything about it. But she's happy I'm enjoying myself, with Jacob and, uh, the witches." Before she could continue, she caught herself, shaking her head and frowning. "Sorry. I make it sound like the stuff I had to deal with before I was a vampire was hard. It's nothing compared to what you ladies deal with all the time."

Natasha was going to interject, and defend Samantha. She lost her daughter, of course she should have trouble with that. But Antoinette raised a hand, just slightly, enough to get everyone's attention.

"It is all relative, my childe. We adapt to our environments. The trials you faced, losing a husband, and raising two children? A massive hurdle, considering your world. Then to lose your son, and push on? Come now, Samantha. Impactful novels have been written about women who have struggled through such pain. And then, after what Angela did? You have more than earned the right to indulge yourself. Heal your soul."

"Heal the soul." Samantha smiled as she held her necklace. "Jacob and the witches are, uh, certainly helping me relax."

"How's Triss?" Tash asked. "I haven't t-talked to her in a while."

Samantha squirmed, and a hundred emotions ran across her face so fast, Tash couldn't identify them.

"She's good. She's a lot happier now, thanks to Jennifer. I, uh, didn't expect her to... um..."

"Beatrice," Antoinette said, "was once a simple Carthian, a rebel with little in the way of a cause. Now, she is a witch, and every witch I have ever dealt with has had a certain confidence when it came to... sexual exploration. Julias's death has scarred her, surely, but witches will embrace sexuality for reasons others would not consider. Healing the soul, as I said, or to make a fellow Kindred feel welcome. Like a hug." The white-haired woman grinned at Samantha. "I suggest you do not mention Julias to her, if you should ever find yourself in a sexual situation with her. She is healing, in a way that witches heal. Do not feel guilty if you indulge of her as well."

Tash raised a brow as she looked at her boss, but wiped her eye to hide it. Antoinette was being awfully forthcoming, with her childe and getting close to the witches. Really close.

Not that what she said didn't make sense. Witches, and all Kindred really, didn't treat sex like humans did, and it probably paid to remind her very, very young childe that. But Jacob was a scary man. Getting so involved with the witches, no matter the reason, even sexy reasons, was dangerous.

After a few minutes of thinking, Samantha spoke up.

"But you're right," she said, gesturing to Natasha. "We're vampires, not human women anymore. Focusing on romance all the time is dumb." She didn't sound too convinced.

"Perhaps," Elaine said. "But I have been single for a very, very long time. I would be remiss to suggest that romance is not worth the effort." Nodding, the elder leaned forward over her laptop and looked at Natasha. "Have you thought of a punishment for your two delicious lovers, yet?"

Ugh, not that. She held Elaine's eyes for a moment, before she outright whined, and let her head land hard on the table. "I... d-did. I didn't think it was a good idea, but the Prince says it is. I haven't talked to them in six weeks, though. I d-don't even know if—"

Elaine shook her head. "Nonsense. Those boys will jump through hoops to win your heart back." The most evil smile Natasha had ever seen snuck onto the woman's face. "You are a woman. Dare I say, it is in a woman's nature, to make men dance through hoops. And it is a woman's nature to, perhaps, enjoy it a little?"

Tash frowned at the ancient woman, but all that did was make Elaine chuckle, and return to her work. Yeah, a lot of women loved to make men do absurd stuff to win them over. Manipulation. A relationship built on manipulation was a horrible idea! And she wouldn't do it.

She could, she knew that. Some doe eyes, a trembling lip, and the boys would probably break and do whatever she wanted, assuming they were still interested in her. But the very idea of doing that made her want to puke, and then hurt any woman who did that to her man. Or men, in her case.

"Natasha's suggestion was a perfectly reasonable one," Antoinette said. "But she is hesitant."

"It could cause p... p-problems, if they say no..."

"Problems have already been created. Avery knew she overstepped herself, attacking Maria, but in that circumstance, it is on the Second Estate to defend their position. The pressure I can put on the werewolf for that blunder is, ultimately, not as strong as what I can place on her for daring to attack one of the dragons of this city. For that, she must pay. And if you do not collect, Natasha, then I will collect myself, and Daniel and I will be considerably less delicate."

She gulped, and nodded. "Yes, Prince."

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Elaine and Antoinette left. Business, according to them. What sort of business they were up to, Natasha had no idea, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. She was still struggling with knowing that some sort of dark, mysterious force was working in Dolareido, and in all likelihood, up to no good. Jack had updated her and Damien about his suspicions it was Black Blood, and that made Jacob all the scarier.

“So,” Samantha said, stuttering and squirming a little. “Jessy. Um, she really... has sex with Eric, when transformed?”

Oh god not another one.

“You c-could ask her yourself, any time. She's completely, t-totally shameless.”

“I could, I could. But she's, um, a little intimidating.”

Tash giggled. “Jessy's just very upfront ab-bout what she likes.” Shrugging, Tash pushed Elen's strange book aside. “Another one for storage.”

Samantha nodded, grabbed the book, and set it beside the pile of other weird artifacts. Her eyes lingered on the book for a second, before she fiddled with her necklace a couple times, and looked back to Tash.

“A lot of vampires seem to be very upfront about the things they like.”

Tash laughed and shook her head. “N-Not all of us.”

Samantha smiled at her. “True. You're a lot more reserved. Every vampire I've seen half your age is, um, willing to do... well, anything, anywhere.”

“Mekhet d-don't like to get involved as quickly as other Kindred.” Much as she tried, she couldn't help but grin a little at the new dragon. “Daeva... are sort of the opposite.”

Samantha squirmed, but smiled too. “I thought maybe Antoinette, and Elaine, were maybe peer pressuring me a little. Not to sound mean! Just, they're both very... sexually aggressive.”

“They are, b-but it's not because they're asshole teenagers who want to make you conform. Antoinette in particular, she knows w-what she's doing. If she asks you t-to do something, there's a

very good chance it'll be good for you. It might make you happy, or b-better yourself for the future.”  
Antoinette played the long game better than any of them.

“That’s true. They’re so old, and wise. But sometimes I do think they’re, um, a little disconnected, from the reality for a fledgling like me, you know? Every night, I feel like I’m a little girl, overwhelmed with every new experience.”

“Is Jacob helping? Or... t-taking advantage?” Gently now. If she made Jacob sound like the villain she was sure he was, Samantha might get defensive.

Samantha sat back and thought about it. She might have been only a fledgling, but she was still a full grown woman in nine years, with plenty of experience under her belt. If Jacob was taking advantage of her, she’d know. Or, maybe not. There were lots of stories of older women being taken advantage of by scheming men, and vice versa.

“He’s helping. He had my permission, the first time things got sexual. And the... following time. After that, he um, stopped asking, but not because he wanted to take advantage of me. He learned what I liked.”

Natasha returned the woman’s shy smile. It’d been like that with Art and Matt, too. The first few times, she had to give them permission to do things to her. After that, once they were doing sexual things, the boys felt comfortable enough to surprise her, sometimes with some very kinky or rough play. And—

And stop thinking about the boys. You’re a vampire, newly in your ancilla years. You’re powerful. You’re ex-Right Hand, and now you’re a dragon of the Ordo Dracul. Antoinette wants you to investigate extremely dangerous... things, about the nightlife of Dolareido, because she trusts you. Stop acting like an idiot little girl.

“That’s good,” Tash said. “Jacob has been... d-difficult to understand, since Minerva died.”

“Ah, right, Minerva.” The young Daeva frowned, and leaned forward toward Tash, elbows on the table. “Jacob talks about her, sometimes.”

“He... d-does?” Tash blinked at her, several times. “He doesn’t talk about Minerva with... anyone.”

Samantha sighed, nodding. “I can see why. It hurts him, when he does. And he doesn’t talk about her much.”

“It’s a little strange, f-for your boyfriend to talk about their... dead girlfriend, isn’t it?”

The Daeva shrugged. “A little. But it’s obvious he hasn’t talked about her with anyone. And, he’s so old, so ancient, that talking with him isn’t like talking with a normal man. I can tell him anything, and he understands. I don’t need to navigate any male ego.”

“That must be nice.”

“Ha. Come on, Art and Matt didn’t sound like they had any ego problems.”

“They are nice... boys. Dumb, s-stupid boys.”

Samantha nodded apologetically. “With Jacob, there’s none of that. And it’s not like we talk about anything sexual, when we talk about our past. But, I tell him about James sometimes, about how we met, and how we fell in love. He talks about Minerva, and I can tell he’s moved on, same as me. But, there is something there, something lingering around, and... I don’t know. James dying was horrible, and it scarred me, badly. Then what happened with Jack, and then Mary, so much worse. But he knows exactly what to say to me about it. But with Minerva, it’s like, her death left... something else, something more than just grief.” She shrugged and sat back. “I don’t know. It’s a very weird relationship. I’m happy to be in it, but yeah, very weird.”

Natasha absorbed, and did her best to not let Samantha realize she was saying very important information. No one knew much about Jacob. Even Antoinette said the man was a mystery, and she knew him better than anyone. Which might have meant that Antoinette let the man date her child, because she saw it as a way to learn more about the mystery man. Was that the main reason she let the relationship happen, or maybe even nudged Samantha toward Jacob? To learn more about him? Or was it all just a happy accident?

“I d-don’t envy you. I mean, it must be amazing, dating such a wise man, and, um, being so close with his circle, and—”

Samantha giggled, reached out, and pat Natasha’s hand. “You may think it’s dumb to talk about boys, but I haven’t been able to talk about boys in years!”

“Years?”

“After James died, I didn’t date again. That was over ten years ago.”

“That’s... a long time.”

Samantha smiled, pat Tash’s hand again, and sat back. A sensitive topic, surely, but the look on her face said she’d been through this conversation before.

“I’d been with him for a long time, when he died. We married young, and had Mary young.”

Right, Samantha was in her forties when she was embraced. Late forties, even. She looked beautiful.

“You d-don’t look like you’re in your forties, you know.”

The Daeva beamed. “Well, Mary really helped me get my life together. A couple years of taking care of myself did a lot to turn me around. But, as much as Mary was insistent, I... never really talked to her about, you know, guy stuff.”

“She—”

“Oh, she told me about her boyfriends, but she was only in a couple relationships. And she didn’t talk to me about sexual stuff. I’m her mother. And, I didn’t talk to her about sexual stuff, cause I’d pretty much just be talking about James, her father, and...”

“Those would be some... awkward c-conversations.”

“Exactly. And sure, I tell Mary about stuff sometimes now, but... but talking to her now is hard. And sometimes I tell Antoinette about stuff, but she always has that, um, teacher aura, right? It can be annoying sometimes, talking to someone who knows everything, and has done everything.”

Natasha smiled. “Are you saying I d-don’t know anything?”

“What? No! No, that’s not—”

Tash laughed. “No no, I get it. I... d-definitely didn’t do much socializing, for a long time. After Daniel sired me, everything was so... scary. I didn’t handle it well. I ran, and the closest thing I could understand was the Invictus. I met Jessy, and... Julias.” Natasha couldn’t help but laugh some more, silly memories dancing through her head. “Jessy, she... has d-definitely been an aggressive person, for a long time.”

“Maybe I’ll talk to her more, in the future. She’s intimating, but nice. She did lend me her ghoul.” Samantha grinned and drew a few lines in the table with her fingers. “Jacob says I should have slept with them when I had the chance.”

“They’re... they’re very talented.”

Samantha blinked at her, before erupting into giggles. “Jessy?”

“Jessy. She... she was there, and she s-sorta... convinced me... to join her.”

A perfect opportunity for Samantha to start teasing her. But, she didn’t. She smiled like a shy, guilty little girl, and nodded.

“I’ll tell you a little, if you tell me a little?”

Tash laughed. “D-Deal.”

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~~Damien~~

Damien smiled at the little redhead beside him. She’d crawled into bed with him again. She had the key to his apartment, but none of the barriers he had up against his bedroom door were moved, boxes of clothes and whatnot. They served no purpose other than to let him know if someone had come into his room while he slept through the day. But he knew Fiona could get into his room without moving the door if she wanted. And she had. Scary.

He rolled under the covers, faced her, and laughed. She was facing away from him, and wearing one of her nighties, green, loose, and partly see-through. Judging from the sound of her breathing, she’d fallen asleep. And judging from the nightie, she’d planned to surprise him for some wake-up sex, but had apparently been impervious to the draw of sleep. Probably fell asleep maybe twenty minutes ago.

So naturally, he did what any man would do when presented with this situation. A human man would likely use the bathroom upon waking and return, but not a vampire. He was free to press his naked body against his lover’s back, slip an arm up her stomach under the nightie, and lean over her to set a kiss on her neck as his hand found her breasts.

“Nmmn.”

“Good evening,” he said, and he kissed her neck as he gently cupped the underside of her higher breast in his fingers and palm, and squeezed. Softly of course, enough so the huge breast’s supple skin and great weight molded to the shape of his hand.

“Mmmng.” Fiona squirmed a little, but settled again, and didn’t move. “Mmm.”

This was, according to various sources — Jack and Jessie — a special right men were given once ‘I loves you’ were exchanged. If the woman was still in bed while the man was waking, and the woman was also supposed to wake but hadn’t, he was allowed to play with her breasts. Considering how deep a sleeper Fiona was, and how long it took her to wake up, the first time he’d tried it she hadn’t resisted him at all.

“I like the nightie.”

“Mm.”

“Did you plan to entice me with it, when I woke up?”

“Mmhmm.”

“It’s working.”

“Nnmm.”

He chuckled, a sound he was growing more and more used to every night, and kissed her neck some more. As he did, he caressed her breast, sliding his fingers around and teasing her skin, and soon her large nipple. Every so often he squeezed a little harder, and shivered as his fingers sank into her enormous bust.

And then his phone rang. He lifted his head and glared at the nightstand, Fiona between it and him. But without so much as opening her eyes, Fiona reached for the stand, feeling around like she was fumbling blind, grabbed the phone, and tossed it over her shoulder at him, all very unwieldy. He had to snap his hand out from under her nightie to grab it.

She knew the deal. If he was getting a call, it wasn’t some silly, social thing. It was business, and important business at that.

He answered. “Yeah Jack?”

“Damien, hey. How’s the leg?”

Damien looked down at the sheets, and tried to move his regrown leg. It didn’t listen.

“Returned, but unresponsive.” He could feel it, but it refused to obey commands, vitae unable to force muscle and tendon to function. It would likely work again in the next week or so, with the help of his girlfriend’s potent blood helping him, but an injury from werewolf teeth was ten times worse than he could have imagined. It could take longer.

“I was afraid of that.”

“Sorry, Jack. Werewolf teeth—”

“It’s no problem. It’s not that sorta trip anyway. I was... gonna see Matthew and Arturo, and talk to them, about... things, I guess.”

Damien frowned. “Be careful. Bring Jessy if you need to.”

“I’ll think about it. Thanks.”

Damien ended the call, set the phone behind him, and looked back to Fiona. By the Lord, she'd fallen asleep again. Rolling his eyes, he returned to snuggling her back, and again snuck his hand up under her nightie to find her breasts.

"Mmmgmgmg." The cute little shadow monster stirred up from her slumber, but only managed to open her eyes for a moment, look up at him, smile, before closing her eyes and melting to the pillow again. Looking down over her, he could see a wet drool spot on the pillow cover.

"Jack's visiting Art and Matt today. I don't know if he'll be able to do much."

"Tash loves them," she whispered, "and they love her. It'll be... fine... mmmm."

Quite half asleep. He chuckled, kissed her neck some more, and hugged her against his chest. And once she was snug there, he took full advantage of the special rule, and resumed fondling her underneath her nightie. It wasn't long before her nipples began to swell, barely, but they did, and he could smell the growing arousal on his girlfriend.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear.

"Nnnmmmm."

"Should I let you sleep?"

"N... no... Wake me up." Her words didn't match her request. She snuggled into the pillow, and returned to drooling.

Wake her up, she said. He smiled, kissed her neck again, and fondled her breasts some more. Heavy, soft, addictive to touch. He could easily roll her over, and do all sorts of things to those breasts. And she'd love indulging him.

But, much as Fiona enjoyed having her breasts played with, and had indulged him many times in the past, it wasn't what she really loved. So, he sat up, slowly pulled the blankets down so she wouldn't notice, before he yanked her up onto his lap.

"Mmmmwha? What's—eep!" She meeped as he set her pelvis over his lap, ass in the air.

And with a grin, he gave it a nice, wake up slap. Her meep turned into a squeak, and her elbows planted on the bed.

"Do me a favor?" he asked.

"What? What, I'm awake! I'm—nnng!" She squeaked again as he spanked her, before resting his hand on her ass, and softly kneaded the meat of it. Lovely, soft, pale skin. No freckles either. A large

butt that felt absolutely wonderful in his palm. He teased it, massaged it, slid his fingers up and down it, from tailbone to thigh, before he gave it another, playful slap.

The result was immediate. Fiona didn't always need a roleplay scenario to enjoy a spank, he'd learned over the past few weeks. She didn't need to always be put into an extreme, submissive situation. She didn't need to be Kissed, and rendered helpless. Often, she was plenty happy when he simply pulled her over his lap, and spent time admiring her lovely, amazing ass, and giving it a slap or three, or twelve.

With her dotting on him the past six weeks, he'd gotten used to her being around a lot, and he continued to be surprised with how much he enjoyed it. Anyone else, even Jack, and he'd tell them to give him some space. But Fiona? He wanted her around. A lot. He wanted to hear her laugh, giggle, and talk about silly things he normally wouldn't care about, like movies or celebrity gossip.

And he really liked the squeaks she made, when he spanked her.

"Can you keep an eye on Jack for me tonight?"

"But, I thought ye said he was seeing Matt and Art tonight?"

"He is, but I don't trust the Uratha."

She looked over her shoulder at him, something of a frown and smile on her lips. "Aye, me neither. Except for Eric! He's yum."

Damien rolled his eyes, and spanked her again.

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~~Jack~~

Jack didn't get five feet out the door before his phone rang. He had a mission tonight, for a friend, but he couldn't ignore this message. He kinda wished he had.

He got a ride to the Xnomina HQ, and stepped in through the front door.

"Mister Terry. Mister McDonald is waiting for you upstairs." Gloria Jennings sat at her desk, beautiful, in the reserved way most Mekhet preferred. She wasn't actually a receptionist, but she spent a

lot of her days playing the role for Xnomina. He'd met her, on the first night he'd been embraced, when Julias took him to this building to see the council.

There was no more council, just Michael McDonald, an asshole with a chip on his shoulder.

"Madam Jennings, how's your child? Miss Pol and I haven't talked in some time." He could still remember talking with Amanda on several nights, when they had to worry about hunters. Hell, she'd helped him spy on his mom and sis. A fucking lifetime ago.

Gloria met his eyes, winced, and looked back down at the screen of her computer. "Yes, Mister Terry. She's fine. Been in a few brawls with the Carthians though. She lost an eye."

His turn to wince. "She'll regrow it, I'm sure."

"Mekhet don't regenerate as well as others. She's young, and... it'll take some time."

He stepped in closer. Apparently a mistake, because she slid her chair back a few inches when he did.

He stopped, sighed, and looked away. "Know who hurt her? Which Carthian?"

"No. It was a brawl. Some random shot from a pistol." Which meant more than just losing an eye. That was a damn heavy wound for a young Mekhet to suffer.

Nodding, he walked past her, and didn't look back. Easier to imagine she wasn't carefully avoiding getting too close to him, even though he knew she was.

She was scared of him.

He looked to other Kindred as they stepped off the elevator. Isabella Leuvion nodded to him, but walked past him with a bit more hurry than usual. Her new child Danny, following her sire close, gave him a wide berth. Bruce, an old friend of Julias's and a Ventrue, met his eyes for only a moment before stepping around him, far around him. Vicky and Parker, the pair that loved running schemes in Devil's Corner, literally turned around when they saw him, and took the elevator down a floor. Probably to take one of the hidden exits, just so they wouldn't have to get close to him. Those two were assholes, but at least they were honest about it.

They were happy he'd kicked the hunters' asses, and that they could go about their second lives as usual again, barring the fight with the Carthians. They were happy, but scared of him. After hearing about what he did to Avery, scared elevated to terrified.

It's not like Jack had fought them all in a vacuum. They'd been injured already by Damien, and Maria had put on some damage on Avery too.

He sighed and shook his head. True as that was, they'd still been in good shape, and most of the pack had been unharmed. He'd defeated twelve werewolves, on his own, and everyone in the whole city knew it. The only vampires not avoiding him, were his friends, and his boss.

He clutched the necklace Elaine gave him, and took the elevator up.

Elaine. He still had trouble figuring her out. Whatever scheme she had, whatever her plans, they involved the curse. Except, meeting him had put a stop to those plans. Maybe? If he had to take a stab in the dark, he figured Elaine came to take the curse from him, now that it'd been freed. She definitely missed the power it used to give her, even when locked up, and probably regretted her decision to get her curse removed. Hopefully his talk with her helped her understand how bad an idea that was.

He trusted her. He didn't trust her. It was weird. It was how vampires did things, a mix of trust and mistrust, and he really fucking hated it. For someone as old as Elaine or Antoinette, it was natural. To him, it was very, very much not. He wanted to be honest, about everything, all the time, and every single time he took a step into the real world, it quickly became apparent that he shouldn't be, couldn't be. He needed to play the game, the Danse Macabre, and get used to doing it in his sleep.

So, as he stepped into Michael's office, he put Danse Macabre on repeat in his skull. Play the game.

"Mister Terry. Welcome. Come, sit." The big guy gestured to the office table.

Jack bowed his head slightly. "Mister McDonald." He took a seat, putting only four feet between him and his boss.

Michael was a big man, bodybuilder build, white, with a shaved head and several tattoos. He even had several piercings on his face, though on him, they made him look like some sort of underworld boss, instead of a Carthian. Which was basically accurate. He was an underworld boss, and had the history to back up his tough guy routine.

"How goes your latest task?" Michael asked.

"The Carthians aren't going to let go of the Mirrden district without a fight, sir. I wasn't able to approach."

Michael sighed and leaned back in his office chair. "I suppose it was too much to hope that the rumors spreading about you would be enough to scare them off."

Jack shook his head. "I had three laser sights on my chest the moment I got out of the car."

"Which you could have easily survived."

Well, technically any vampire could survive a few bullet wounds. A gun pointed at a vampire was a mild threat, but still a threat, and he'd have been stupid to take it lightly.

“Did you want me to get violent at the time, sir?”

“No. Not yet. But with Mister Burksen and Madam Turio not yet fully healed, I do find myself... wondering if you should be using that curse of yours more aggressively, Mister Terry.”

It took a mountain of effort to keep a frown from forcing its way onto Jack's face.

“The curse isn't reliable, Mister McDonald.” Jack tapped the necklace on his chest. “It's going to backfire, and when it does, it'll be worse than anything my grandsire ever did.”

Michael let out a long, heavy sigh, and met Jack's eyes. Well, at least he was willing to do that. No one else in the Invictus was, except Jessy.

“Strong words, Mister Terry. Viktor Honors was a terror, more than you know.”

“I know quite a bit, sir. My sire shared some stories with me, and I've seen the dungeons in my mansion.”

“Right, the mansion. I trust it is being well kept?”

Jack smiled. “Been keeping an eye on me, sir?”

“Of course. You have become a valuable asset. And the mansion is valuable property.”

“My new thrall keeps good care of it, and she takes to her training well.” She wasn't as scared of guns as he thought she might have been. “And soon she'll have help. Plus, I have many animals guarding the building, more than just my two friends. But... you didn't call me in here to talk about the mansion.”

“No. I called you here because Garry is going after the Tanvar building next.”

“The Tanvar building? That's one of our factories in North Side.”

“A re-purposed factory. An office building now, and it handles a lot of the transactions Xnomina deals in.”

You didn't need a building to handle transactions anymore, unless the transactions were physical in nature. Office building? No, that was Xnomina talk for a building with dealers on site.

Xnomina dealt with a lot of illegal drugs, but they were pretty good about keeping it out of the hands of anyone under eighteen, and making sure proxy dealers did the same. They dealt in illegal weapons, but were pretty good at keeping it out of the hands of random thugs, preferring to support

other companies that went up against... well, other companies, doing equally dark shit. Jack didn't exactly like how dirty a company Xnomina was, but at the same time, they didn't cross any major lines.

He could ask what sort of shit Tanvar got their fingers into, or leave it a mystery. In the past, he'd have been more comfortable not knowing, and too afraid to ask someone as important and strong as Michael.

"What sort of black goods does Tanvar deal in?"

Michael managed a small grin. "Cigarettes and cigars."

"Really? That's it?"

"You'd be surprised how many places in the world consider them illegal; in particular, buying from third parties."

It was easy to forget sometimes that Xnomina didn't just have its hand in national businesses. It was international, like any large company, and happy to get its hands dirty in the shadow economy. Like any large company.

"I—oh, right, Terra Den."

"Exactly. Mister Tones's new friend has his eyes on many fields of business, and Terra Den is no stranger to the black market. I have some intelligence that shows Garry's men investigating the building."

"That's a little surprising. With Madam Turio and Mister Burksen still out of commission for a while, I thought he'd have pushed in on the government district." Where the Cathedral was, and where the Second Estate liked to sink their claws.

"He can't move in on Turio and Burksen directly. That area has too many clean eyes. And he knows that, while Turio is no longer a council member for the Invictus, she is still my partner. She'll help me. I'll help her."

"No one helped her when Avery attacked. I got no back up, no—"

Michael leaned forward, and held Jack's gaze. "We were there ten minutes after you were, Jack. If Avery had actually killed Maria that night, don't think I wouldn't have done something about it, either." The man had a damn hard gaze, like steel. He might not have been as old as the Prince or Jacob, but that didn't change that he was centuries old.

Jack sat back and nodded. First names. He used to think they'd make him calmer, but they didn't. Titles were a nice barrier between him, other Invictus, and the nasty realities they had to deal with.

“So you want me to keep an eye on the Tanvar building.”

“Yes. I think Garry will get violent over this one, as well. Be prepared to defend yourself.”

Defend himself. He meant use the curse. Well fuck that.

“Yes sir.”

“And Jack. Maria told me what you did.”

Jack frowned at the man, but kept both hands on the arms of the hilariously expensive office chair. A quick snap of the hand to remove the necklace, and he could go all out and kick this man’s ass. Probably. Hopefully. And as long as nothing bad happened, the Ripper wouldn’t get to have a say.

“I see.”

The big man shrugged and shook his head. “I had no love for Lucas, Jack. The man was an even larger pain in my ass than Viktor.”

Some tension melted from Jack’s body.

“I thought the First and Second Estate always backed each other?”

“Hardly. The Invictus and the Lancea et Sanctum often cooperate, yes, but there are many cities where they do not. And this city was quickly becoming one. We remained their ally almost entirely due to Maria’s influence. When the Prince enacted the purge, the Invictus did not participate, as you know.”

“I assumed you didn’t want to go up against the Prince?”

“Jack, please. The council was a triumvirate, we had well over a hundred Kindred at the time, and it wouldn’t have taken much to convince Tony to join us against his sire. No, we didn’t go against the Ordo Dracul, because it didn’t serve us to. We knew the way the wind was blowing, saw what was happening to Lucas, even Maria did.” Sighing again, Michael leaned in, elbows on the table, and met his eyes again. No steel this time, just a man looking to talk. “I don’t have to tell you that you should avoid Maria.”

“Ha, yeah.” He squirmed in his chair a little as he met his boss’s gaze again. “I hope she’ll come around.”

“She will, in time.”

“Has she... told anyone else?”

“Not to my knowledge, but don’t be surprised if more people find out. There are a lot of eyes watching you, Jack. Jacob and Elaine, the most obvious, but others as well. Don’t think Isabella will hesitate to get her fingers into your brain if she can.”

Jack squirmed again. “I don’t like her.”

His boss laughed. Not something he usually did. “She’s the best type of enemy to have, one that can be your ally in the right circumstance.”

“And Elaine?”

“Elaine. Those few times she visited, she did well, hiding her relation to your grandsire. Her motives are difficult to discern at best, but I’ve got a few ideas.” Which meant he had a couple of well-thought-out possible plans, if he had to kill her. “She is a genuine dragon though, devoted, and everything I know suggests she is indeed an old friend of the Prince’s. You can trust her to some extent.”

Some extent. Ugh. He already trusted her to some extent. It was trusting her completely that he couldn’t bring himself to do, and probably something Antoinette didn’t either. For the Prince, that was perfectly normal, but it grated him. He liked his great grandsire, even more after their conversation about how... damaged, she was. A genuine, real, honest conversation, that didn’t manage to fully answer the question: what exactly did she originally plan to do to him?

“I’ll start hanging out in the Tanvar building then. Rules of engagement?”

“We’re the defenders in this idiocy. You’re in the clear to kill any ghouls or thralls that get violent.” Same as before then. “And if any of the Kindred get violent, I expect you to not only deal with them, and defend the facility, but I expect any Carthians that are willing to get directly aggressive to die.”

Jack winced and looked down. “You know that will trigger a war.”

“Yes, but if we don’t stop the Carthians, they’ll continue to march on us until we have nothing left.”

“That’d take them decades at this rate.”

“No. This is the pebble that starts the avalanche. If we let them have Tanvar, they’ll be swarming our other projects in a matter of months. We stop them here and now, and if it gets to the point of actual war, then at least it will be on an even front.”

Sighing, Jack nodded and stood up. “Then, later tonight I will get familiar with the building.”

“Jack.” Michael didn’t stand up, but he leaned back and looked at him, eyes hard again. “No one else knows that you have my permission to kill. And if the first death of this war is to happen, it makes sense it should be your kill.”

“Why?”

“Because, as much as Dolareido has become quite terrified of your curse, they also respect your mind, and your position. Your mind, because you tend to err on the side of logic. Your position, because you are lovers with the Prince, one of the founding members of Dolareido, and she is the persistent voice of cooperation, now matter how foolhardy such an ideology may be.”

“I happen to agree with her on a lot of things, Michael.”

A hint of a frown crossed the man’s face. Him referring to Jack without the title, fine, but Jack referring to him without one, not so fine. Well, fuck him.

“Deal with Carthians at the Tanvar building, Mister Terry. If you kill no one, but keep the building secure, then all is well. But I expect you to keep that building secure, no matter what Garry tries. Understood?”

“Understood.”

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“Sometimes, I really hate this fucking city.” He slipped his hand back into his jacket pocket, and Mulder and Scully, now with fully bellies, took off and found high perches to watch him from.

“Aw, dinnae say that! Ye love Dolareido.”

He groaned at Fiona and shook his head. “Not tonight I don’t. I fucking hate this place, and the vampires in it.”

Giggling, Fiona hooked his arm and half hugged it as they walked. Not many people around outside this time of night, this close to the Carthian district, so he felt comfortable saying words like ‘vampire’ and ‘fuck it all to fucking shit hell fuck’ loudly.

He wore his usual Invictus business suit. Fiona wore blue jeans and a brown leather jacket. She fit in well in the area, but Jack didn’t feel like fitting in, not now. He was kinda hoping someone would come close, start yelling, and give him a reason to get violent.

“I love it. I met Damien, and Jessy and Eric. And Azamel, and...” Uh oh, she said the A word. Her giggles vanished, replaced with sniffles, and she hugged his arm tight to her side as she snuggled into him. The Begotten were more a family than he had ever expected, a close family.

“You really like her, don’t you?”

“Aye. She’s been... been great to us.”

“You think Sándor will make a good replacement?”

She shook her head. “I mean, he’ll be good, right? He’ll protect us, and guide us, but Azamel was the grandma who knew how to be soft and hard.”

“She’s definitely wise, I’ll give her that.”

Fiona nodded, and loosened her grip a bit so they could start walking a little faster. “I’d have ne’er met her back home.”

“Dolareido is pretty welcoming to paranormals by contrast to a lot of places, I guess. I... want it to be better, but stupid shit keeps happening. Damien tell you what Garry’s been up to?”

“Aye.”

“But you know to stay out of it, right? I don’t care what Garry or Michael or Maria do, let Kindred deal with that shit, ok?”

She groaned but nodded. “Aye. But tonight’s not about that, right? Ye’re gonna speak with the lads.”

“If they’ll listen. Not sure it’s going to go the way Antoinette wants it to. Avery’s not exactly the sort of type to let things go. She’ll go after Maria again, somehow, and she might take a swing at me too. Matt and Art, they’re in her pack, her family. They might—”

“Nae true, lad! Love will prevail!” She wiped her nose free of sniffles, let go of him, and hopped around as she got ahead of him. This was a level of happiness he hadn’t expected.

“You got laid this evening, didn’t you?”

“Aye, I did, ye nosy fucker.”

“Don’t think I don’t know you’re dying to talk about your relationship.”

She exploded into giggles and hopped over to him. “Maybe, but not with ye! I talk to Jessy and Natasha.”

That was probably for the best. Jack doubted he could handle a conversation like that for five minutes.

“Well, for what it’s worth, Damien’s happy. I first met the guy when he was out to kill the Prince, and a bit after that, when that failed. Dude was royally messed up depressed. Took a while before I thought he wouldn’t just... wait for a sunrise to get him.”

Fiona sighed and nodded as she filed in beside him again. “Aye. He needed ye. I’m glad yer his friend.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you came along. He really needed someone like... well, you.” It wasn’t exactly a secret that Damien had that ‘emo vampire’ vibe going on, and would have fit perfectly in a really shitty movie where he was basically a stalker for a typical Mary Sue idiot. Someone like Fiona, on the other hand, fit him much better.

“I am a pretty lass. The prettiest.”

Uh oh. That was Jessy talking.

“You hang out with the Gangrel too much. Didn’t you used to date Eric? Isn’t that a bit awkward?”

“Nae. I mean, we did for a wee bit, but it didnae last. He’s too...”

“Old?”

She giggled and smacked his chest. “I guess that works.”

“Damien’s a lot older.”

“Aye but not in the same way, ye ken?”

Yeah, that was true. Damien had a lot of hate and depression built up, but it wasn’t over the same sort of shit Eric did. Jessy fit him better. She understood things like divorce, or shitty wages, on a level neither Fiona or Damien had ever really dealt with.

“So, Fiona, you’re a shadow monster, right?”

“Aye.”

“You probably sneak around a lot and keep up to date on things in the city?”

She grinned up at him. “A wee bit. It’s dangerous to be going around, sneaking in the dark.”

“Been watching the Uratha lately?”

“Aye.”

“Seen what Clara’s been up to?”

She grinned some more. “Aye.”

“And... gonna tell me?”

“I dinnae think I should.”

Jack squirmed as he walked. “Come on. It’s not like that. I hurt her in that fight, really bad. I just want to know how she’s recovering.”

“Her arm’s grown back. Uratha are strong.”

“Crazy strong. Takes Kindred decades to get the strength they get in weeks.” Nodding, they turned a corner, and Jack took a few seconds to look around. The Carthian district, the edge of it, where Avery’s apartment was. “I’m glad she’s feeling better.”

“And I hear she’s been getting to know that hunter, Harcourt?”

He grit his teeth, but shook his head, shaking it off. That shouldn’t bother him. If anything, it was good she was hanging out with a hunter. It’s what Antoinette wanted, for the hunters here to realize the paranormals weren’t enemies. And Clara and Jack weren’t an item, couldn’t be an item, and it was better for her to move on.

The Beast in him didn’t agree. The Beast told him he should own everything he felt he wanted, control and dominate it. Clara was very attractive, and a werewolf. The Beast wanted him to sink his fangs into her, and more besides. It wanted to bind her with the Vinculum, turn her into his pet, and feast on her every night, even as it trained her to be his guard dog.

He sighed and clutched the necklace around his neck. Even with it, the Beast grew louder all the time. Nasty side effect of the necklace? Maybe.

“Good for her.”

Fiona giggled some more, but didn’t push the issue. She did start keeping a closer eye on the environment. Carthians were probably watching from windows, and no doubt some of them had the hardware to snipe them from a distance. Jack would survive it, and then there’d be hell to pay. Fiona wouldn’t, but the Begotten weren’t their enemies.

Jack opened the door to Avery’s apartment building. Brianna stood inside, leaning back against a wall, and glaring at him.

“The fuck? Thought you said—”

Jack held up hand. “Not here for that meeting. I’m here to talk to Matthew and Arturo.”

Brianna folded her arms across her chest and glared some more. A somewhat tall woman, dark skin, with short black hair, she growled and considered. Jack was just thankful the woman wasn’t attacking, with the look she had on her face.

“Brianna, come on,” he said. “I’m not here to fight anyone. We can deal with that shit later. This is a personal visit.” She continued to glare. “Fucking hell, come on. You want to see Derick and Santos again, right? This is just step one of my ninety-nine step plan to get everyone in this city singing kumbaya.”

“We ain’t fighting with anyone.”

“Bullshit. After what happened, the werewolves are being treated like Garry’s buddies, and you know it. When’s the last time you even visited Bloodlust?”

She tried to glare at him some more, but her eyes fell after a time. “Not since the incident.”

Christ, even she was calling it that.

“I’m just gonna get Matt and Art, we’re gonna go for a walk, and talk.”

“What’s to stop you from Dominating them?”

“Two Uratha at once? I’m good, Brianna, but not that good. Besides, the necklace is on, and it’ll stay on.”

She scrunched up her nose and considered some more. Jack almost started yelling. This was the problem. No one trusted anyone, and some trust was needed if he was going to fix any of these problems that were fucking exploding all over the damn city. If he had to—

“Fine. Wait here. Avery doesn’t want you in the building.” She pulled out her phone and sent a text. Finally, progress.

It took a bit, but Matthew and Arturo stepped down the old stairs eventually, dressed in jeans and t-shirts. No limp. They were healed. Next week, Jack would have to visit the whole pack, Avery included, with Tash, and try and fix the whole situation. This would be a good way to test the waters, and if possible, repair something.

He was good at fixing things. That’s what he did. Supposedly.

“Matthew. Arturo.” Jack said.

“Hey lads,” Fiona said.

“Fiona, Jack,” Art said, eyeing them with some obvious suspicion. “Why’re you here?”

Jack nodded toward the door. “Come with me.”

The boys looked at each other, then to Brianna. She shrugged and gestured to Jack with a half swipe, before she sat on a chair. Guard dog duty.

They followed him, though the two men kept a close eye on Jack as he left the building. In retrospect, Jack was damn glad Fiona was with him. He was confident Garry’s goons posed no threat, not in this situation, not if they didn’t want to overstep themselves and piss off the Prince and the Invictus even more. But the werewolves? He wished he had Damien with him, but Fiona would have to do. And it wasn’t like she couldn’t help him out, maybe even more than his friend.

“Couldn’t send a text?” Matt said. “We got phones in the city because you guys told us to.”

Jack laughed, and not a happy one. “Yeah, cause I’m sure Garry didn’t also suggest it.”

Art snorted. “Did you come here to threaten us?”

“No. Came to have a chat, so follow me. I like to walk and talk.” He didn’t mean to sound so forceful. A few years ago, he would have struggled to say something so directly. Not because he didn’t have the personality for it, he very much did, but because he wouldn’t have felt comfortable holding power over others. How the times had changed.

Fiona bounced around a few times before she fell in beside Jack again, and the boys fell in behind him. He didn’t actually plan to just walk around randomly. He was going somewhere, but it didn’t matter for now.

“I didn’t come get you to talk about the problems on our laps, about Maria and shit,” he said. “I came to talk about Uratha getting along with Kindred, in general. Brianna, and you two, for example.” He looked back at the two men. They both had their eyes downcast, frowning, and grumbling a little. “Brianna’s situation sucks because of the Carthian Invictus stupid little war. Mason’s isn’t so bad, but I’m sure he’d prefer if his girlfriend didn’t find herself at the other end of an Invictus shotgun. And then there’s you two, the idiots that staked a dragon.”

“We didn’t have a choice,” Art said.

Jack shook his head, “Let me put it in perspective, guys. If I was in Avery’s pack instead of working for the Invictus, and Avery told me I had to do something where I knew Antoinette would either try and stop me, or intervene in some way, risking her life, you know what I’d do?”

Matt lifted a hand. “You—”

“The situation wouldn’t have happened, guys. Cause even though, if I was you, I’d have trusted Avery, I wouldn’t have let things get... like that.” They rounded a corner, Jack shaking his head the whole time. Trying to explain the situation was so damn hard, because it wasn’t like they were exactly wrong for what they did. “This way to the diner.”

The boys looked at each other, brows raised, before looking back at him. “Diner?”

He laughed. Tash was right. They really did say things at the same time, a lot.

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“I’ll have this fancy chicken thinger, lass, and this! Oh, this sounds nice.” Fiona held up the menu for the waitress, and pointed at several things. No point in trying to say them, and not because she had a Scottish accent. It was a bunch of words Jack didn’t know either, French stuff. But he was pretty sure Fiona had basically ordered some sort of chicken with melted cheese, and a side order of oysters.

Jack glared at her. “Fiona, that is a messed up meal. How can—you’re just picking the most expensive things on the menu, aren’t you?”

She beamed at him before grinning up at the waitress. “And I’ll definitely be wanting dessert!”

Jack rolled his eyes. The guys got some blue rare steaks, predictably. Jack ordered nothing.

It was a quiet little restaurant, Invictus owned of course, but not a place for Kindred to get a drink. It was empty tonight, and the staff were all thralls. It was a good place to talk. The restaurant was also a front. They dealt in illegal goods using the restaurant, heavy drugs, shit Jack wasn’t happy to be supporting, but while Xnomina kept it out of the hands of kids, he wasn’t going to stop them.

Maybe in the future, when he had more of his fingers in the Dolareido pie, but not yet.

“Trying to buy us with expensive steaks?” Art asked. “Cause, I mean, that could work.” The man smiled, but Jack could see he was nervous. Still, it was a funny comment, and Jack laughed quietly. He could see why Tash liked these guys.

“No I’m not trying to buy you off. Just... I know I can be an asshole when I argue. I’ve always been like that, since well before I was vampire, you know? Just wanted you guys to know I’m not an asshole, if I get uppity.”

“Uppity?” Art asked. “Not angry?”

“Yeah, uppity. Like this.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table. “You’re gonna listen to me while I explain the situation, got it?” They both frowned, but nodded, quickly getting what he meant by uppity. “Good. Avery did what she thought was necessary, I get that. I don’t have all the details of the how and why, so I’m not gonna make a judgment call on that action. She should be damn happy you guys have been of use, dealing with that azlu and whatnot, or the Prince would be more proactive about dealing with you idiots.

“But, yeah, she did something super risky because she really thought she was helping the city. I can understand you backing her, and so does Natasha.” He tapped the table with a finger. “That’s not the issue. So understand I’m here as Tash’s friend, not as the guy who’s hired to keep everyone getting along.” Sighing, he sat back, and food was served. The boys glanced at their meat, but it was clear their appetites were damaged. Fiona, naturally, devoured her chicken with gusto. Large appetite on the small girl.

“The issue,” he continued, “is that you violated her trust. And I get that you did it because it was the only way to do what Avery needed, but that’s the breaking point. You could have talked to her, explained the situation, asked her, and put some faith in the relationship. But you didn’t. You basically threw the relationship into the garbage, cause you thought for sure there’d be no way to save it, while also doing what Avery wanted. And sure, you probably also did it cause you thought Tash might get in harm’s way, and you didn’t want that. But, again, that’s violating her trust in you, and any faith in the relationship.”

He ground his teeth. “What should have happened, is you guys tell her — before shit hit the fan — that you might attack Maria at some point. You come to some sort of understanding, and accept that yes, you might find yourselves in a situation where you attack Maria, and have to do so without telling her. You trust the relationship to be able to survive that! You trust Tash to not fuck you guys over, either. Not stake her, set her aside, and basically abandon the relationship because you think being on opposite sides of a problem automatically means it can’t work out.”

They both opened their mouths. Jack swiped his hand through the air.

“Eat your meals. I’m not done.” They both grumbled, but did as ordered. Fiona smiled at him, big smile, mouth full of chicken. Kinda ruining the vibe, but whatever. “So, maybe the issue is that your relationship wasn’t strong enough? Which sounds like bullshit to me, cause everything Jessy’s told me — which is a fucking lot — tells me Natasha is head over heels in love with you two idiots.”

That got them squirming. They looked at each other a bit more, and froze, as if finally coming to a realization. Then they looked at Fiona when she made some loud munching noises, before they slowly took another bite of their meal.

“I guess you guys hadn’t gotten to that point in the relationship yet, or hadn’t realized it anyway,” he said. “Well, Jessy says she definitely does. And judging from the looks on your faces, you feel the same way. I don’t know why you didn’t say it, or she didn’t say it. Could be the two guys one girl thing. Not exactly a common arrangement.” He shrugged and put up his hands. “I’m not judging, and couldn’t care less. I got a woman five hundred years older than me trying to get me to recruit my own harem. Dolareido, and anyone in its night life, aren’t ever going to have normal relationships.”

Sighing, he leaned back. God damn, he loved to rant. A little too cathartic, really.

“So,” he continued, “she loves you two, you two love her, and there’s a barrier between you: what the pack and covenants want. The issue isn’t actually the barrier, much as it seems like it at first glance. The issue is your lack of trust in the relationship to be able to survive that. And, of course, that you literally stabbed her in the chest with a piece of wood. Stealth wood, from what Jessy tells me. So not only did you not trust Tash, you were prepared to violate her trust, ahead of time! No fucking wonder she’s livid.”

They both winced, looking down, before they slowly took another bite of their meal.

“What do we do?” Matt asked.

“Tash is going to ask you to do something, something her and the Prince — probably mostly the Prince — have cooked up. It’ll be repayment for the assault. Do it. Even if it pisses Avery off, do it. Do it because you trust Tash to not do you wrong, okay? Even if means pissing off the Ordo, Tash wouldn’t do you wrong. Get it?” He stabbed a finger at the edge of the table, and relaxed. “A step in the right direction.”

The boys looked at each other again, sharing a few more wincing before sighing and nodding.

“How’s a kid like you understand shit like this?” Art asked.

Jack shrugged. “It’s easy to see the flaws in shit when you’re looking at things from the outside. I’ve been a student of the human condition for a long time. I watch people, watch them squabble, watch them say stupid shit to each other, read about it all the time, and…” And it wasn’t something he’d ever be able to wrap his mind around. Typical person-on-person interaction was a chaotic mess of stupid. But, just like Julias and the kine he envied, Jack couldn’t help but envy those stupid people. They played the social game, found love, lost love, got laid, had fun, and all the things he’d been too afraid to

do. “I’m damn lucky I found the relationship I did, cause I’m pretty sure I’d be single for eternity otherwise.”

Art smirked. “Certainly enough of an asshole for it.”

“Yeah well, shit needed to be said, and I don’t have the fucking patience for romcom bullshit. It’s funny when it’s a tv show. It’s ludicrous when it’s real life.” The waitress returned, taking their plates, and handed Fiona a small menu with a drawn picture of a champagne glass with something solid in it, and a spoon sticking out. Ice cream. Fiona grinned maniacally. Jack rolled his eyes. “So, get me? It’s a messy situation. Tash understands why you guys followed Avery that night, but that doesn’t excuse you violating her trust in you, and you shitting all over the relationship. That’s the problem.”

Matt shook his head. “It’s not that easy, Jack. We’re Uratha. We follow the pack, and it wasn’t like we disagreed with Avery. We still don’t. Something’s up with Maria, and—”

“You will leave Maria alone, or I’ll put every last one of you in the hospital.”

“Jack,” Art said, “something—”

“Something is up. And you idiots are falling for it. But that’s not what this little meeting is about. We can talk more about Maria next week. We’re here because Tash is a good friend of mine, and she, and you two, deserve a chance. But unlike she, or you two, or most people, I’m apparently the only damn person in this city willing to just say things straight so shit can actually. Get. Fixed.”

The waitress returned with two very fancy looking bowls filled with some sort of soft serve ice cream topped with cherries and bananas.

The two werewolves shook their heads. “Uh, we didn’t—”

Fiona pulled both bowls in close, and got to work.

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Jack lifted a hand, made a small wave, and Mulder and Scully rejoined him, perching on his shoulders. With Fiona and the two wolves gone, he wanted his friends close.

The Tanvar building, final stop of the night.

Like the restaurant, the Tanvar building was a front. It had offices, with computers, and he was sure during the day they’d be running, a bunch of people working at them. Probably not on the illegal

shit though. Didn't take an office building full of office workers to help move black market goods. They probably just did typical Xnomina stuff, trading stocks, while criminals under their feet rolled up illegal cigars and whatnot.

Right now, the building had a few thralls and ghouls standing around, some of them armed with rifles, some with shotguns, and most with pistols. A lot of suits. If the cops showed up, they'd know something illegal was going on just by the look of all the kine, standing around like secret agents, but the Invictus owned the cops so that wasn't going to happen.

“Jack.”

Jack smiled, and nodded to Hella. The Gangrel was dressed in a suit as well, a slightly tall woman with tan skin and short dark hair. Unlike her girlfriend Isabella, who wouldn't be caught dead in pants, Hella wore a normal suit.

“Hella Vendram. How's Danny?”

She raised a brow. “The fuck do you care about Danny?” Apparently, she hadn't expected him to remember Isabella's new childe's name.

“Just making conversation. You know we're on the same team, right?”

“Didn't give me that impression, last time you came for a visit.”

Sighing, Jack stepped past Hella, and down into the basement. Classically, a single bulb dangled from a cord, an old school bulb that would probably flicker and die on them any moment. But once he was past that, the stairs stopped at a door, he opened it, and a large concrete room welcomed him. It smelled of various chemicals, boxes were piled high, and a couple kine walked around with clipboard, checking things off.

Jack laughed. A paper trail was better than a digital trail. You could burn paper, when you were done with it. Digital information, if it left the machine it was created on, was borderline permanent.

“These boxes,” Jack said. “Just filled with cigarettes and shit?”

Hella nodded. “And other things along those lines.”

“But it's not what the Carthians are after.”

“Not exactly. Terra Den wants to put a hole in what we're doing here. Hurt Xnomina's bottom line. We have a lot of shit set up so we can move all this crap through this building, and it'll take time to get the same shit set up elsewhere. And we always keep a vamp or two here, and a squad of suits, to keep this area secure, you know? If the Carthians take it, that's a vantage point we lose.”

“It’s only a vantage point if it’s helping protect an important area. The area is only important, because we’re fighting over it.”

She shrugged. “You can argue with McDonald over that. I got my orders, and like you made so abundantly clear on your visit, I have duties.”

He almost asked where Isabella was. Better to not poke the bear.

“Any Carthians actually attack the building yet?” he asked, reaching up and offering his pets some oats. They cawed, pecked at the food, and looked around, drawing the eyes of the thralls with the clipboard. Jack grinned at them, and fed his friends some more oats.

“Nah. But they’ve scouted the area, so they’ll probably show up any night now, before Turio or Burksen can be a thorn in their sides.” Hella leaned against a stack of boxes, and grimaced as she looked at the clipboard, once the two kine handed it to her. “Used to be that Garry didn’t know a damn thing about this building and what we were doing here. But that fucking Jeremy Long asshole and Terra Den really know what they’re doing. If they can, they’ll take over our distribution, and that shit hole Montoya will have a new job.”

“Montoya.” Jack frowned as he wandered around, examining the boxes. “Right, that guy. I met him once, when I confronted Jeremy for the first time.” When Jessy overstepped and punched Garry. Lucky she was still alive, after that. “Fucker still handing out loans to people he knows can’t pay him back?”

“Yeap. Everyone knows about what happened, with Eric and Montoya’s shark, some dude named Pitt, but it hasn’t stopped Montoya.”

And why would it. Now that his boss was a vampire, Long had access to all the information he needed to help Montoya pilot the paranormal world. Ultimately, Montoya didn’t matter, now that Eric didn’t owe him anything, but still, it was just another pain in the ass Jack had to keep track of.

“So,” Hella said, “if you’re here, I’m guessing McDonald thinks shit is gonna get really bad?”

“What makes you say that?” Almost a rhetorical question, but, he did kinda want to hear her answer.

“Everyone knows you send Jack the Ripper when shit is about to get real.”

He snapped his gaze at her, and she took a quick step back.

“I’m not Jack the Ripper.” Christ, did someone share what the curse wanted to be called? Did Jack say it to someone by accident? Or did people just extrapolate from his name? God damn it.

“Fine, Jesus. All the rest of us know, is when shit gets bad, McDonald sends Jack and his curse to fuck it up.”

McDonald sends? Of course Michael would spin it so Invictus would think Jack did those things on Michael's orders. Not a bad plan. Michael would gain influence, and he knew Jack didn't want so much focus pointed at himself.

“I'm not here to fuck things up, Miss Vendram.” Back to titles. Make this shit official. “I'm here to stop things from going to shit.” A lie. Michael was hoping Jack would be forced to kill someone, so he could have his war. Problem was, Garry was determined, and quite possibly willing to sacrifice someone to make that war happen.

How to fix this situation? The more Jack looked at it, the more it looked like he couldn't.