

~~Jack~~

He knocked on Damien's door. Someone very much not Damien opened it.

"Fiona," he said, smiling.

"Jack! How are ye, ye bawbag? And who's this lass?"

"Veronica, meet Fiona, Damien's girlfriend, and... a paranormal creature."

Both Jack and Veronica were dressed in suits, though Veronica's was less fancy. It was how Invictus did things. Vampires and their servants were well dressed, but it was obvious who the master was.

Fiona, on the other hand, was wearing a white button shirt, and nothing but. Damien was above average height, while Fiona was short, almost short as Tash; the shirt covered her enough to hide her ass, but only barely.

"Paranormal?" Veronica's eyes lit up, and she shyly waved at Fiona. "Hi, Fiona."

"Hi Veronica! Jack, ye here to see Damien?"

"Yeah."

"Damien!" She turned, hopped a bit, and waved down the hall. "Jack's here to see ye!"

Jack facepalmed. "I coulda done that."

Fiona stuck her tongue out at him, skipped down the hall, and came back with Damien, the biggest smile Jack had ever seen on her lips. Even Damien had something of a smile on, a bit awkward, and a bit happy, an emotion the man didn't show often. Something had happened between them.

"Damien," Jack said, and he sighed as he looked the man up and down. "Looking better. How long till the leg comes back?"

He shrugged with one shoulder, other locked onto the crutch he leaned on. "Fiona's blood is damn strong. A few weeks?"

"Yeah but those werewolf teeth are strong, too."

Maybe he should have worded that better. Damien winced and looked down at his missing leg, hidden inside his suit pants, folded halfway down the femur.

"Jack, about Maria."

“Antoinette’s talking to her tonight,” Jack said. “She seems to think Maria won’t be as big a problem as I think.”

The Mekhet nodded. “I agree with the Prince, then. Maria’s not as... obsessive as we thought. I think you’ll be fine.”

He had a hard time believing that. So far, elders were the ones that were either the most logical and wise, or the most insane and willing to burn everything to a crisp for their pursuits. But if both Damien and Antoinette were on the same page, maybe they were right? Maybe Maria wouldn’t do everything in her power to catch him, tie him up, and slowly set him on fire? Nice thought, but he probably just jinxed it.

“Veronica, Damien. Damien, Veronica.”

Veronica finger waved. Damien nodded a greeting.

“New thrall?” he asked.

“Yeap. I’m taking her around and introducing her to friends. She’ll be at the mansion most of the time, so, figured she should know who she can trust.”

“Ye can trust me, lass!” Fiona hopped past Damien, grabbed a very startled Veronica’s hand, and shook it with way too much energy. As long as Jack had known Fiona, she’d always been a happy hyper kinda girl, but this was a new level of enthusiasm. “Ye gonna build yerself a harem, Jack?”

Again, Jack facepalmed. “I didn’t plan on it.”

“That’s nae a no.” Giggling, Fiona slipped back into the apartment and beside Damien, and she cuddled his free arm to her side. “Lass, yer master’s dating the horniest, most beautiful vampire in the world. Be ready for—”

Damien nudged her side, and she giggled.

Veronica blinked at Fiona several times, probably also surprised by how bubbly the girl was. Well, bubbly was good. Bubbly was great. It was a nice reminder paranormals didn’t all have to be edgelords.

“Did you want to come in?” Damien asked.

Fiona shot Jack a quick look, complete with a harsh glare. Very much a ‘go away!’ glare.

“Uh, sorry, can’t. Like I said, showing Veronica my friends, so she knows who’s who, and meets them. Presence is important.”

“I’ll talk to you later then.”

Fiona smiled a thanks for Jack, waved, and took Damien back to his bedroom, bounce in her step relentless.

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Back on the street, he walked the sidewalks of Dolareido with Veronica at his side, her slightly behind him. He didn’t ask her to do that, she just did it. And he’d be lying if he said he didn’t kinda like that. The Ventrue half of him was happy. He had to be careful, or this whole situation would feed his ego until it burst.

“Uh, Fiona,” Veronica said, “... she said something about a harem?” She leaned in close enough she could whisper it and be heard over the street traffic.

Jack half laughed, half groaned, and motioned for her to walk beside him. She did, nervously, and he smiled at her.

“You and others will be responsible for my property. With training, you can become my day guard. With more training, you can become... a lot of things. But, harem? That wasn’t my plan. It’s just... sex and vampires go hand in hand. Cliché, I know, but you remember what happened when Elaine Kissed you.”

The thrall shivered and blushed. “That was... amazing.”

He raised a brow as he looked at her. Sure, Julias had taught him a lot about reading people, but Veronica made no efforts to hide what she was thinking. She enjoyed that night.

“And I won’t lie, Antoinette has two ghouls — thralls that have been elevated and given immortality — that join us in bed all the time. She, Elaine, and—”

She grabbed his arm, and her eyes went wide. “Immortality?”

He grinned at her. “Told you there’d be perks.”

Slowly, she let go of his arm, and shivered again. He recognized that shiver, the sensation of a new reality finally sinking in, the mind opening and letting in a myriad of unthinkable futures. It was quite a rush.

He started walking, and she meeped as she dashed to catch up.

“So,” he continued, “while I will be creating new thralls, you’ll never be asked to do anything sexual. Give blood on occasion, yes, but nothing sexual. And... if you did want to do something like that, Antoinette would be there. We love each other, a lot.”

“I know. I saw it in your eyes, and her eyes, when you looked at each other.” She giggled as she joined his side again. “You’re so different from each other! And she is... uh... well.” At first she used a single hand to reach up and suggest height. Then, after a shy glance, used two hands to suggest a giant bosom.

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. Every moment with Veronica was like taking a kid to Disney World; evil corporate greed included, given he was Invictus.

“Antoinette’s got quite a history. She’s half a millennium old.”

“Holy shit.”

“Elaine, too.”

“Holy shit!”

“And you don’t have to commit to anything like what Fiona was suggesting. I’ve put enough on your plate as is.”

She blushed again as she looked down. “Well, this is Dolareido. I’ve done some crazy things, and I liked doing them.”

He smiled at her, knowing damn well he was giving her that ‘I knew that already, I’m your father’ kinda look, and kept walking. It wouldn’t exactly be fair to assume she’d done crazy things, just cause she lived in Dolareido. He’d been born and bred in Dolareido, and did absolutely nothing crazy his whole life. But, she did have blue hair, nipple piercings, and a clit hood piercing, according to Elaine. There was some fire in her, and she wore it on the surface.

“Next up on the list. Jessy and Eric.”

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He sent Jessy a text, and she directed him to Bloodlust, which of course meant loud EDM, lots of red light with bits of pulsing white that made the whole place feel like the inside of a literal heart, and lots and lots of drugs and sex.

“Ever been in here?” he asked.

“Not Bloodlust, no. It’s super expensive! And fancy and stuff. I’ve been to nightclubs, and a couple raves. But not here.”

Well, this would be quite a night for Veronica then. He walked up to the bouncer, and without a word, the bouncer stepped aside and opened the door for them; Invictus employee knew him on sight, after all. Veronica followed Jack in, and a glance back showed the utter awe on her face as she looked from the bouncer to Jack. Every moment was a new revelation for her, and Jack couldn’t help but enjoy it. This was too damn fun.

And he needed that. After what happened last night, he deserved a little fun, right?

People stepped aside for him as he walked past the bar, and stood before the dance floor. Some of them recognized him, but most didn’t. Maybe it was his limp, and how he avoided any hard steps to not put pressure on his insides. Maybe it was his eyes, and the confidence he carried, confidence he’d slowly built up over the past three years and then some. Or maybe it was his aura, the vampire aura of the Beast even kine could occasionally sense. Whatever it was, kine stepped aside for him, and Veronica stared at him all the harder as they did.

Up on the second floor, he looked around at the booths. The closest one had a couple of Invictus vampires in it, two women. A kine male sat between them, and was being treated quite nicely with both vampires pressing their barely covered breasts into him as they nibbled on his shoulders and neck. Both had a hand in his pants, which Jack was thankfully unable to see with the table in the way. Judging from the look on the man’s face, he was swimming in bliss.

Next booth had a male vampire, with a woman riding his lap, facing him. She had her dress down and off her shoulders, and she pressed her fake breasts into his chest as the man drained her.

Next booth beyond that had a scene Jack had actually seen before. No vampires here, but two male kine sitting outside of two females, with their hands up their girls’ skirts, fingering them hard enough to make the two girls shake. They were loving it, and they buried each other in kisses and fondling hands.

Jack walked past them all with only a short lived glance, though he could tell Veronica wanted to watch, even if she didn’t realize it. Moving on was enough to have Veronica chasing after him, and he smiled to himself as she did. The vampire in him loved that.

“Jessy, Eric,” he said. “Oh, Natasha, hi. This is my new thrall, Veronica. Veronica, this is Jessy, a fellow Invictus, and Natasha, a member of the Ordo Dracul. Vampires. And this is Eric, a bouncer here, and a werewolf.”

“Hey.”

“H-Hello.”

“Hi.”

“Hi,” Veronica said, and she gulped. Not audible this time, considering the music, but Jack noticed it anyway, watching her in the corner of his eye. She wasn’t just some random, pretty kine following him around. She was his thrall. Little kernels of awareness tickled up through his consciousness, demanding he pay close attention to her, protect her, and watch out for her.

Jesus, no wonder Antoinette felt so protective of Ashley and Julee. Veronica was his thrall, only dosed twice, and he couldn’t help but notice how much the Beast in him demand he protect what was his. If she ever became a ghoul, would he go shopping with her, pay for a decade of education, and keep her at his side at all times?

Daeva did that. Daeva were more protective of their ghouls, and anyone they fed on a lot, compared to other blood clans. So maybe he’d never have the same relationship with Veronica as Antoinette did with Ashley and Julee. Maybe he would. Antoinette treated her ghouls like they were precious, and that they’d leave the care of her nest some day. She was their master, but it was a strangely nice relationship, which was kind of twisted to think about. As long as he kept his head, and didn’t let the Beast consume him, he could keep his relationship with Veronica balanced and healthy, and some day, let her go. Hopefully.

“So, Jack,” Jessy said, and her grin grew. “Harem?”

He threw up his hands. “The fuck? Did Fiona text you?”

“Fiona? No. Why?”

He grunted and groaned as he facepalmed. “Not everyone needs a harem like you, Jessy.”

Veronica gasped and looked between Jessy and Jack. “She has a harem?”

“Had,” Eric said with an eyeroll. “Then we started dating.”

Natasha managed a weak smile as she looked to Jack, but it brightened when she looked to Veronica, and held up four fingers. “She has four ghouls. B-Big guys, and she’d... well, you know. And at the same t-time!”

“Uh, you joined me in that orgy a few times, last I checked, Tash.” Jessy shrugged. Totally shameless.

Poor Tash. She winced and lowered her head, her plan having backfired. Jessy was shameless, but Tash was not. Jack almost made a comment about her having two boyfriends, and how awesome that was, no need for the shame. But, that could change very soon for all he knew.

Jessy pat her friend on the shoulder, and smiled at Veronica. “You are the sexiest thrall I have ever seen. Love the hair.”

“Thanks!” Veronica perked right up, and looked around with renewed vigor. “I... I didn’t realize this place would be so, so um...”

“Full of sex and kine ready to be Kissed,” Jessy said. “Jack, can I have a taste? Or, you know, maybe borrow her? She’s very—”

Jack aimed a fist at her. “No. Bad. Down.”

“Aw come on! I lent your mom my boys!”

“She didn’t fuck them!”

Jessy frowned and looked between him and Eric. “But, I need a girl to—”

Eric slipped an arm around Jessy’s shoulders, and pulled on her hard enough to bring her down into his lap in a sort of capturing hug. “Nice to meet you, Veronica. Don’t worry about anything she says, Jack won’t let anything happen to you.”

Veronica giggled as Jessy wrestled to get free. “This is all so new to me. It’s kind of hard to believe that... that there’s two vampires and a werewolf in this booth. I—”

Natasha lifted her head, and pulled a cheek back enough to expose her teeth. On cue, she grew her fangs, and Veronica gasped. She did love to gasp, but it was warranted, considering how much her life had turned upside down in record time.

“You uh...” Eric shook his head. “You don’t want me to prove it.”

Jessy snorted on a laugh, but nodded. “Probably for the best.”

Veronica almost asked, but Jack waved at his friends and walked back toward the stairs, and she darted after him. But despite her enthusiasm to follow him, a glance back showed her stalling a bit, eyes dancing around to the booths again. One of the women was sitting on a man’s lap, facing away from him, and had pulled her top down so the dress was hidden by the booth. Diamond nipples bounced

around on her jiggling breasts, and the kine smiled at Veronica as her mouth opened with moans, lost to the music.

Veronica stared, until Jack started down the stairs, and she squeaked and dashed after him again.

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“Your friends are nice,” Veronica said as she glanced around at the hall leading to his apartment.

He laughed and shook his head. “They can be, yeah. Jessy is a total sexaholic though, so be careful around her.”

“She won’t—”

“She won’t do anything without my permission, but that doesn’t mean she won’t put you in some extreme situations to tempt you.”

“Extreme?”

“Honestly? I expected to find her at the club, fucking Eric. She might have, if she’d known you were coming, even with Tash right there.” It’d hardly be strange, considering the group’s sexual history.

“Oh.” She giggled and shook her head. “She’s aggressive.”

“Very, and about everything. Tash is her opposite. She...” Sighing, he rubbed his hair, and opened the door. “There’s a lot of shit going down, between us and the werewolves.”

“Eric?”

“No, not him, the other werewolves, a pack of them. Tash dates two of them, and then shit went down yesterday and... Best to not bring it up unless she does.”

She nodded, and followed him into his apartment. “Wait, two?”

“Yeah, two big guys.” He held up a hand indicating their heights. Seriously tall Art, and giant Matt.

“But she’s so tiny!”

He shrugged again and sat down on his couch. Not a fancy hall bench or whatever, just a nice, high quality couch, black leather, comfortable as hell. One of the things he loved that didn’t belong in a luxurious mansion. Or, maybe it could? It was his mansion. Maybe he could have a room dedicated to



being comfortable instead of just looking it, while not being it. Or maybe he could just redecorate the whole damn thing like rich kids did these days, and have it all set up with black leather and shit.

“We all have our kinks,” he said. “You saw Antoinette and Elaine, and the type of women they are.”

Veronica giggled again, and sat down beside him. “You’re lucky.”

He winced and shook his head. “Luck in love? Extremely. In sex and money and power? Yeah, extremely. But I’m not telling you about the other shit, the unlucky shit, and it’s going to stay that way, for a long time. Don’t want you getting involved.” Fuck, it was really hard to not sound like some emo tragedy case when describing his situation.

“But you just told me a bunch of stuff.”

Laughing, he leaned back and clutched his chest as pain hit him, ending the laughter with a grunt. “Just the surface stuff, stuff all the Kindred in Dolareido know about. Nothing another Kindred might want to learn about, and use you to do it.”

“It sounds like you have a lot of enemies.”

“Enemies is... a strong word.” He pulled out his phone, and flipped to a picture. “Here. We won’t be visiting these people, but yeah, this is Beatrice. She dated my sire. That’s him, too.”

Veronica smiled wide as she took the phone. Sharing pictures of people and talking about their lives, that was the sort of thing she probably did in her free time, before Jack adopted her. A social woman. Maybe she’d rub off on him.

Veronica’s smile turned to gasp, and she blinked at the picture on the phone. “That mouth is terrifying! And... and she’s showing her tits! Ooh, the man behind her is handsome.”

“Ha, yeah, Triss and Julias. She took the picture and sent it to me. She’s a Nosferatu. They all have disfigurements, random. One of my old bosses looks like a corpse, and she leaks mist out of her skin. Basically a walking, talking graveyard.”

“And your sire didn’t mind Beatrice’s, uh, Nosferatu features?”

“Nah. Crocodile mouth? Snake eyes and claws? Barely registers as strange for a vampire with a few decades under their belt.”

“She is beautiful, in a strange way. And scary, but wow...” She ran a finger down the picture over Triss’s exposed stomach. “How does she keep a figure like that? I—”

Jack laughed. Oh god. “She’s a vampire. She’ll keep the figure she had when she was embraced. The abs, the hair, the muscle, it’s permanent. She could get a haircut, and tell her body to not regrow it during her daily sleep, same with the tattoos and piercings. But otherwise, yeah, her body is permanently like that.” He pointed at his head. “Alas, I buzzed my head a few days before I was embraced. I’m stuck like this.”

She giggled. “Still, you’re so fit, and so’s she! It must be nice to be like that forever.” Her smile faded, and her finger slid over to the man beside Beatrice. “And Julias. He’s... gone now?”

Not forever, not at all.

“Yeah, killed by hunters. We got revenge, but... yeah. She was damn happy, back then.”

“But not anymore.” She lowered the phone, furrowing her brow.

“She’s a member of the Circle of the Crone, now, and since Julias died, she’s gotten really deep in it. Neck deep.”

“Circle of the Crone?”

“Witches,” he said. “Like, hardcore witches. Think orgies and sacrifices under a full moon in the middle of a forest, while someone wears the skull of a horse for a mask, witches.” That got her eyes super wide, almost comically so, and he smiled as he took his phone back.

“Scary.”

“Yeap. But Beatrice is a close friend. If she shows up, you can trust her. Maybe not her boss — a dude with a bandage over his eyes — or her friends, but she’s trustworthy. Jessy, Damien, Fiona, Natasha, let them in if they show up at the mansion.”

“Um, b-but not Eric?”

“Eric.” Jack sighed, leaned forward, and set his elbows on his knees as he considered. “The other wolves in the city are proving to be a problem, but Eric’s not part of their pack. But, he’s not a vampire either, and not part of any covenant. So... if he shows up with Jessy or the others, it’s fine. Alone? Much as I hate to say it, tell him to leave.”

She gulped and nodded. Telling someone like Eric to go away would be difficult for her.

“And, um, Fiona? She’s...”

“Not a vampire, right. She’s a monster. And she’s be helping me with some serious stuff for a long time now. You can trust her.”

“Monster?”

“Monster.”

“I... don't understand.”

“Neither do I, honestly. There are vampires, and werewolves, and ghosts, and—”

“Ghosts!?” She sat up straight, eyes wide, like he'd just dumped ice down her back.

“Ghosts, and other classics.” Damn she was adorable. Probably how Julias felt about Jack, every time he dumped a new info bomb on him. “But Fiona, and a few others, they're... they're monsters. Like, monster monsters. The things that creep under your bed, or hide in your closet. The presence that comes up through the drain and drowns you in your own bathtub. The creature that lurks beneath the water, or hides in the trees. Unique individuals, monsters of legend. Things that literally feed on your nightmares and...” Yeap, that was too much. Veronica stared at him like he'd just shot her mother. “The ones in Dolareido are not our enemies, but they are... well, think Pennywise. You should probably—”

She jumped off the couch, and turned around in place several times as she clenched her fists in front of her, and squealed. “Nooooo!”

“What!? What?” He jumped up as well, and that fucking hurt.

“I'm afraid of clowns!”

He stared at her, and laughed, laughed hard enough he groaned and fell on his ass a second later, clutching his guts.

“None of them are clowns, but they're all monsters, feeding on fear and able to create and feed on your nightmares.”

Veronica sat down again, shivering. “Very scary.”

“Very very,” he said. “But they've been some of my greatest allies. Fiona looks like a simple little redhead, right? But she's a spider monster.” Veronica almost jumped up again, but he put a hand on her shoulder and kept her down. “Not an ugly spider. Strangely sexy, in a weird way.” And, if he guessed right, Vrallar'trakla of the Eight Blade Arach would enjoy taking advantage of Damien's current weakness, like a spider indulging in trapped, wounded prey.

“I have a hard time thinking sexy when I think spider.”

“You’d change your mind if you saw her. You know, once the fear part past, cause she is terrifying too.” He scrolled through the pictures on his phone, and brought up another. “And this is my mom, recently turned vampire, sired by Antoinette.” And probably with the witches at this very moment.

“Oh! Oh, she’s pretty.” She wanted to say more. Probably something about how strange a scenario that must be, Jack dating his mom’s sire. A soap opera drama just waiting for a lit match.

“That’s from before she was embraced.”

“Who’s that beside her?”

Jack managed a weak smile, but didn’t put the phone away or change the picture. Instead, he looked at it, and let the memory hurt him, just a little.

“That’s my sister, Mary. Hunters killed her, trying to get to me.”

“I... that’s... horrible.”

“Yeah, it was. And that’s why I killed them.”

She stared at him, stared hard, trying to tell if he was joking. He held his face stone cold, and a new reality finally sank in for her. Jack, her master, had killed before. Multiple people. Deliberately.

Nodding, he got up, and motioned around. “Let’s check and see if there’s anything in the apartment we should bring.” Time for a change of topics before things got too heavy. “You can—”

He stopped, raised a brow, and slowly turned to face the door as his Beast announced an approaching presence. A powerful presence, another Beast, and a familiar one.

“Jack? M-Master? What—” A few seconds later, a knock came from the door, and she stared at it. “Oh my god.”

“Vampire thing. That’s another vampire.”

“Oh, so I... Right!” Shocked but still smiling, she hopped over to the door and opened it. “Elaine! I... uh...” And of course, her face turned bright red.

“Veronica Tam, how lovely to see you again. May I come in?”

“Um! Uh... is... is that a vampire thing? The whole invite thing?” She looked back at Jack, and he laughed again, shook his head, and motioned for Elaine to come. “Yes. The master says yes.”

How’d she know he was here? Probably had her own thralls or ghouls in the city, keeping tabs on him.

Chuckling, Elaine stepped in. It took Veronica a moment to understand why Elaine didn't close the door behind her, but she got it and closed it. Jack didn't really want her to do any of that shit, especially not in an apartment, but it was too much fun watching her figure it all out.

Elaine turned, looked down at Veronica, met her eyes, and said, "Sleep."

Veronica fell back, body gently collapsing against the wall. She sank down into the corner, instantly sound asleep.

"Elaine? What the hell?" He stood up, but failed halfway and fell back down, guts fighting against him. That was a damn impressive display of gentle but powerful Dominate.

"Calm yourself, Jack. I wish to speak to you."

He frowned at her, eyes scanning for threat. Antoinette was out talking with Maria and some other stuff, and it wouldn't surprise him if Daniel was keeping an eye on her. Elaine, here, alone, was strange.

"You could have talked in front of her."

She shook her head, and sat down next to him. "No, I could not. This is important."

"Then the Prince—"

"This is between you, me, and the curse, Jack."

He clutched at his chest with one hand, while the other gripped the arm of his couch. His eyes scanned her again, hunting for intent. His Beast stood up, ready for a fight. There was something in her gaze that struck him cold.

"What, you want to talk to him? I'm not taking off the necklace." Not unless he had absolutely no other choice. Problem was, he was beat up and healing, and Elaine was five hundred years old. She was deadly powerful.

She didn't come over here to exploit him, did she? No, no way. That wasn't smart, not while she was in a city where the Prince was his lover. Relax, Jack, relax.

Except, remember what Black Blood said. If the curse was something the Strix placed on Susanna, because she fueled the ritual or whatever it was, by committing diablerie, how did Elaine get rid of it? It wasn't a train of thought he wanted to go down, but Black Blood had sewn the seed.

"And I will not ask you to, great grandchilde of mine." She smiled softly as she said it, and turned on the couch to face him. "But, I must know more."

"What? Why?"

“I have dedicated centuries to the study of rituals and curses, childe. Many in the Ordo have. Antoinette knows that, but she would prefer to keep you out of the hands of the others.”

Jack winced, half from clutching his chest, half from imagining the sort of shit other dragons might do to him. And Elaine was one of those dragons.

“You... wouldn’t tell me that, if you’d planned to stake and abduct me, throw me in a box, and do experiments on me.”

She laughed, a hearty sound, and lightly touched his shoulder. “If I wanted to steal you away and dig into what makes the curse tick, I could have done that at many points. But if I did that, I would spoil the friendship I have with Ann. And that is not a friendship I would damage lightly.”

“... that’s really the only reason, isn’t it? If it wasn’t for her, you’d do exactly what I said you would.”

Silence fell on them, and Elaine held an unwavering, analyzing glare as she met his eyes.

“Perhaps,” she said after a few seconds. “I am not Viktor. I am not so cruel as to ignore that you are an individual, with desires, needs, and a soul of your own. But I will not lie. If you and Ann were not in love, and hopelessly so, this conversation would be much different.”

He met her gaze and held it. It was scary, meeting the eyes of someone so old. She acted the horny-older-power-woman well, but like Antoinette, it was a mask, one she probably wore so perfectly and so often, it’d become part of who she was. Beneath it though, there was a different person. Antoinette had exposed her soft side to Jack an eternity ago, that first time at Bloodlust. Elaine though, he still had no idea what kind of person she really was.

“Alright,” he said. She had him at a disadvantage. Better to play along and see where this went. “What do you want to know?”

“He speaks to you, does he not? I want to know about his desires, Jack.”

He frowned again. Antoinette usually called the curse ‘it’, and resisted doing otherwise. Elaine didn’t.

“Not sure what to tell you that you don’t already know, Elaine. I—”

“Describe to me, in detail, little Ventrue. Describe to me... how it feels, this personality that roams your mind. Describe to me the hate and rage. Describe to me the carnal lust this creature has for violence. Describe to me what it is like when the curse takes over, in minute detail. Describe to me the parts you do not wish for Ann or myself to know.”

He stared at her, blinking a few times as he processed what she was saying.

“Why?”

She leaned in, and her usually playful gaze turned into something a lot more desperate than he’d ever seen an elder show.

“Because, Jack, I need to know, and”—she gestured to the necklace—“you owe me.”

Sighing, he nodded and rubbed his head. “Alright.”

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~~Damien~~

Fiona turned off the lights, helped him sit on his bed, undressed him, and slipped him under the covers.

“I’m a vampire, Fiona. Blankets—”

“Aye, I know, but this is fun!” Nodding, she threw off his shirt she’d had on, exposing her small body, her huge breasts, and all her delicious pale skin and freckles. “Ha! I saw that.”

“What?”

“Ye licked yer fangs!”

He blinked, and licked them on purpose. “I did no such thing.”

“Liar.” Giggling, she rolled onto his chest, carefully, and set her weight on her knees and elbows around him. At the same time, she kept her body low enough to lightly press her stomach against his, and her breasts against his chest. “Boob massage!”

“Uh…”

“Yer the wounded soldier. I’m the innocent lass who takes cares of ye, and falls in love with ye.” She giggled when she said love, and kissed him. “Looove.”

He wasn’t sure boob massage was a proper treatment for anything, but he wasn’t about to stop her.

“You don’t seem to mind that I’m missing a leg.”

“What? Cause yer aw mangled and broken?” She shrugged. “Vrall’s seen worse. And it works better with the fantasy.” Nodding, she kissed him again, and groaned. “Looovve.”

He laughed. “You seem happier than usual.” Which was saying a lot. She’d been crying last night, but before then, she was always bubbly happy.

“Of course, ye goose.” She pressed her body down against him a little harder, flattening her breasts against his chest, and earning a groan from him. “Now, fuck me!”

He raised a brow. “I’m missing a leg.”

“Yer fine!”

“And I Kissed you just last night.” He brushed some of her frizzy hair aside to expose her neck. The bite wound was healed, as it always was when a vampire licked it.

She nodded, grinned, and then collapsed on him, on purpose. With all of her weight on him, he groaned again, in pain this time. The leg still hurt, a lot, but vampire healing and her potent blood had already sealed the wound, if only barely. Werewolf teeth were something else, and definitely not just regular teeth. The beating he’d taken elsewhere from the tackles and impacts was fully healed though, and he sighed bliss as he hugged Fiona softly to him.

“I am tired,” she said. “But... but we said the words! The love words! There has to be sex.” Nodding, she pushed her weight back up onto her knees and palms, and crawled forward. Grinning at him the whole time, she slid up until her breasts dangled over his face, before she lowered herself down, and eased herself left and right, literally dragging her soft, huge, heavy breasts back and forth over his nose and lips.

It felt amazing.

“Um...”

“Ye think the Prince does this with Jack? The lad is always getting hurt.”

“I know she does.”

“Ha!” Giggling, she continued, slowly and softly caressing his face with the supple skin of her bosom. “Yer face is always smooth.”

“I shaved the night I was sired.”

“That explains it.” Nodding again, she gently eased herself back, and lowered herself until her lips found his neck. “Drink more.”



“More?”

“Aye, more. Ye still need blood, and I want to try something.”

He frowned, but it was hard to ignore the Beast in him demanding he do as she asked. He was wounded, badly, by a supernatural creature with teeth that burned like fire. More blood was needed to heal the extreme damage, and to regrow a leg.

But her blood was powerful, and special. Drinking it filled him with a dark hunger, made him want to pin her and fuck her until she collapsed. Hard to do that with a leg missing, and he didn't want to drink from her two nights in a row and risk hurting her. She wasn't Uratha. She didn't regenerate as quickly as they did, or Kindred for that matter. Vrall did, but unless Fiona was in her lair, Vrall was something she temporarily summoned, not something she was. Except, she still kinda was? Begotten were strange.

“You sure?”

“Aye.” She slowly eased herself back and forth along his body, and he gulped back the desire to groan. “Ye need to eat, and there is something I do want to try.”

Slowly, he slid his hands up her naked back, one for her shoulders, the other up into her hair, and he held her to him as he sank his fangs into her neck.

He fed on her fairly often, usually accompanied by sex. It was sort of routine by this point, but one they both loved. But no matter how many times he fed on her, there was no getting used to the strange, alien, overwhelming sensation of the Begotten's taint on her blood. Power, a dark hunger he couldn't quite identify as anything other than ravenous, it flooded his body as the warm, thick liquid filled and coated his insides.

The pain in his leg faded, and he squeezed Fiona to him harder, squashing her breasts to his chest as he devoured her. She whimpered as she squirmed in his grip, body quivering with the pleasure of the Kiss, even as it fought against the oncoming exhaustion it caused. The taste of her, and the sound of her mewls, had him hard in moments.

With a predatory groan he almost didn't recognize, he stopped the Kiss, and licked her bite wound closed. Trembling, she rolled off him, dislodging the blanket a bit as she collapsed onto her back. Her breasts spread and flattened against her chest, and her large, pink nipples swelled against her pale skin; he couldn't help but notice.

If he'd been in better shape, he'd have rolled her onto her stomach, lifted her ass up, and fucked her from behind, hard, spanking included. But no matter how much his Beast told him to do just that, he

was missing an entire leg, bit off halfway down the thigh. Tossing Fiona around was just not in the cards.

He smiled as he watched the busty little woman breathe heavy, breasts rising and falling, her eyes closed. So damn beautiful.

“Fiona?”

“Aye. Just... need... a moment.”

“A moment for what? I—”

The world went dark. It'd already been dark in the apartment, lights off, but it went completely dark. He couldn't see his hands when he held them in front of his face.

Flickering lights, gentle in the black, each announced with the quiet clicks of very old fashioned light bulbs, bathed the room in a new light. Ok, he had not expected that. From lying in his bed one minute, to lying in someone else's bed the next. Where was he? The bed was smaller, a bit uncomfortable, and a metal tray stood beside him. A metal chair sat nearby, and so did a door with a small glass window, with some shadows drifting by it.

Yeap, this was a nightmare. This was Sándor's nightmare, the haunted hospital.

“Uh, I thought Sándor owned this?” Hopefully Fiona, or Vrall, could hear him, cause he didn't see her anywhere.

“He gave it to me,” the darkness said in a dark, quiet rasp, Scot accent gone and replaced with some vaguely Portuguese.

“Are... are we here, so you can treat me? Patient at a hospital? I don't see that wo—” He shut up quick as from the dark corner of the room, eight giant spider legs crept out. They stabbed the floor and walls with their sharp points, but silently, her motions smooth and deadly quiet as she approached.

“You are here to satisfy me, Damien. Fiona enjoys being submissive, but I, as you already know, do not.”

Well, she was right about that. He didn't sleep with Vrall often, but when he did, he spent the whole time bound up and being a healthy mix of scared and aroused. He enjoyed it, but that didn't mean she wasn't a terrifying creature.

She slipped out of the dark corner, human-ish body floating, held up by her spider legs. No eyes, but giant horns that came out of her skull, and out from her where eyes should have been, curling back to join the others and creating a beautiful, black crown. Dark skin, like metal. A very sharp jaw and

tiny, black lips. And a spidersilk dress that did a really bad job of hiding her inhuman, amazing proportions.

Chuckling, Vrall used her many legs to pull pillows and blankets together, set them behind his back, and propped up his torso with them, making the bad hospital bed comfy. Terrifying, being in what looked like some sort of hospital bed, back before medicine was all that advanced, but comfy. But then those spider legs spun some web, and wrapped, and wrapped, and wrapped him and the bed together. He relented every time Vrall wanted to bind him, but this time, he couldn't have done anything even if he'd wanted to.

That kinda added to the thrill, honestly.

He gulped as he glanced out the door again, and noticed more shadows shifting under the doorway.

"There is no one here but us," Vrall said. "This chamber in my lair is empty, save for you, and myself. Ignore the creations of this nightmare. They are only as real as the delusions of your own dreams."

He nodded, and did his best to relax back onto the pillows. The nightmare chamber was a stark reminder that being a vampire and being a true monster were not the same thing.

"I can smell the fear on you," she said. "You don't like hospitals?"

"I uh... guess they're kinda creepy?"

She laughed. "You are my patient, and this hospital, my hospital, is where I shall nurse you back to health. A lot more interesting take on the soldier and nurse fantasy, wouldn't you say? A monster, finds a man wounded, and she saves his life. At first he is afraid of the monster, but after a time, they fall in love."

He squirmed a little. Yep, completely trapped. He wasn't getting up until she let him.

"In love," he said softly, and she sighed happily. "And, uh, definitely afraid." Nightmare hospital. Surely he wasn't the only one who thought a hospital, dark, with phantasms and whatnot of people who died from diseases or surgery gone wrong, roaming its halls looking for revenge on the living, was a terrifying nightmare.

"I will have to distract you." Nodding, she slid her claw fingers against her shoulders, palms out, slipped them under the hooks of her dress, and cut the spider silk fabric.

Fiona had large breasts, and so did Vrallar'trakla of the Eight Blade Arach. That was where the similarities ended. While Fiona had a beautiful body, small, curvy, soft but thin, Vrall was a much taller, skinnier creature, with long curvy legs, and an inhumanly tiny waist. And with how lean she was, with a small torso, her breasts dwarfed her chest. Dark, steel-colored skin, with a darker shade for her lips and swollen nipples.

With her weight on spider legs spread out around the room, blade tips against the floor and walls with the extreme precision and delicacy of a real spider, the hovering woman set herself horizontal over him, still hovering. Her heavy breasts hung underneath her like massive tear drops, legs stuck out behind her, and she lowered herself down onto him below where the spiderweb bound his waist. With a sly, tiny smile, she continued to descend, like a spider approaching a trapped meal, and soon her breasts settled along his thighs and pelvis. As her torso slipped between his legs — leg — she licked her lips, and snuggled herself in as close as she could to him, squashing her breasts to him until his cock lifted between them and pointed up, nearly reaching her chin.

It didn't bother her that he was missing a leg. Well, Vrall had probably seen a million worse things in her lifetime.

“You've fed on Fiona, and took deeply. You must be bursting.” With her elbows outside his hips and on the blankets, she set one hand — two long finger claws and one claw thumb — along his covered stomach, while the other slid down his pelvis to his shaft, and with the smooth backside of a claw, guided it straight up toward her sharp chin, between her squashed breasts. Licking her small lips, she gently slid the claw up and down between her bosom, smoothly gliding along his skin.

“I...” He almost said something stupid, like ‘only partly, because a lot of that blood is going toward healing the leg’. But the truth was, Fiona's blood always elicited arousal in him, and a lot of it. A lot lot. It made him want to pin her down and feast on her as he fucked her into a coma. The only thing that kept him in control now, was half the blood going to healing the leg, and being tied up.

Vrall chuckled, a quiet, whispering sound, and slid her claw up to his glans. “I'd be lying, if I said I didn't enjoy how large you are between the legs, Damien. There are things I can do, I couldn't do otherwise.” Slowly, she traced circles around his glans, almost using the tip of her sharp claw but never quite. Little sparks of pleasure danced on the ripe skin, each accompanied by a small jolt of fear, and eventually, a small drop of precum. She let out a raspy groan, and he wasn't sure if it was because of his obvious arousal, or the fact that, despite all their time together, she could still scare him.

With his girth still between her huge breasts, she tilted her head down and down, and set a kiss along his glans. He quivered at the explosion of sensation, sparks dancing along his sensitive skin, and

rippling waves of pleasure working down into him until the bliss spread outward from the base of his cock. Muscles flexed, and cum gushed up through his length, hot and overwhelming.

Vrall smiled, and gently kissed his glans, softly suckling as several gushes of his cum soaked her dark lips. It flowed down back onto his length, and onto her breasts, coating her dark skin in thick lines of white.

“Already? And quite a lot.”

“It’s... your blood, I—”

“And, I think, you occasionally prefer Vrall over Fiona. I think you rather enjoy being bound and helpless, on occasion.” Before he could defend himself, she laughed again, and waved a single, huge claw at him. “She doesn’t mind the occasional sharing with me. And I, her.”

“I—”

She tapped on his abs through the spiderweb with a claw, shaking her head. “Relax, my love. I am Fiona, and not. There are no secrets between us.”

Love? He hadn’t really thought about Vrall when he told Fiona he loved her. But then, Vrall was right, she was and wasn’t Fiona. He loved Fiona, so he... loved and didn’t love Vrall?

Stop thinking, and just relax, like she told you.

Damien took a slow, deep breath, relaxed back against the mountain of blankets and pillows he was tied to, and watched as the beautiful spider creature nuzzled her chest toward his pelvis again. He had cum a lot, thoroughly coating his large cock that Vrall seemed quite enamored with. Chuckling again with her dark, raspy voice, she slowly shifted from side to side, nudging her cum-covered breasts around his length. The weight of her heavy breasts meant they massaged his girth with each motion, supple skin spreading his cum more.

She stopped, and smiled at him again before she leaned her head down, and took his cock’s head into her mouth entirely. Her could feel the flat side of her fangs, four of them, pushed to the top and bottom of her mouth so they wouldn’t hurt him. And he could feel her small tongue gently tracing circles around his sensitive skin, while her small mouth and tiny lips, barely able to fit him, massaged back and forth along the base edge of his glans. The suction and grip of her lips, were very, very tight.

Fiona, for all her unquenchable sexual desire, was relatively new to sex. Vrall apparently had centuries of varying sorts of experience, and if she wanted to make Damien cum a second time in four minutes flat, she could, and did. The right pressure along the base edge of the head of his cock,

massaging tightness from her taut, wet lips, all while her tongue caressed and teased him, was just too much. He squirmed for a few seconds, before another hot gush of his cum flooded her mouth.

She smiled around his cock, eased her motion, but kept him inside her, even as she let his cum flow out from her lips. More streams of white coated his length, and the two breasts squashed between his thighs and onto his pelvis. With her blood filling him and driving his body insane with desire, his orgasms were always long and powerful, and he stared down at the spider monster as she milked him for more cum, until her breasts were coated.

“Two,” she said once lifting her head.

Shaking as the climax settled, Damien gulped and forced his head up. “I—oh dear Lord.”

Using her spider legs, Vrall lifted herself up, stood upright with blade-feet dangling in the air, and turned herself upside down, a slow rotation that took time as her spider legs stepped around and around the walls. Once completely upside down, she smiled at him again, before she descended onto him. One of her hands took his cock and pointed it up to her, while her other slid down her own stomach before slipping between her thighs. As she took the head of his length into her mouth again, she masturbated, and Damien stared as the strange upside-down position showed off her body in a way he'd never imagined. He could see everything, her flat, tiny stomach, her curvy legs, the underside of her jaw as her lips spread around his cock, and most hypnotically, her cum-soaked heavy breasts dangling upside down, and gently jiggling with her motions.

“Um, Vrall, you don't need the acrobatics to—” He sucked in a breath, and forced himself to keep his eyes open, gaze locked onto the underside of Vrall's jaw and throat, as she lowered herself down and down until her lips found the base of his girth. Again, a jolt of fear ran through him. She had four very long fangs in that mouth, and their flat, smooth sides slid harmlessly back and forth along his cock; they were bent out of the way, like a snake's. Fear melted away, or at least drifted into background noise, as he enjoyed to the tightness of her lips, and her throat.

Her slender neck bulged, showing how deep she'd taken him, and he shuddered as she again lowered herself until her lips kissed where his cock met his pelvis. With her large breasts hanging upside down towards her collar bone and shoulders, he had to look between them to see how her mouth slid up and down, and how her neck distended to fit him. They rippled with her subtle motions, and his cum trickled down them and onto his pelvis, and where the spiderweb held his abs.

Her hand between her legs worked faster. How she managed to not hurt herself as she masturbated, he had no idea. Spider precision. How she managed to not hurt him with her fangs, he had no idea. Vrall wasn't human, not even close, but damn, there was no denying how insanely sexy

everything she did was. She swallowed his length whole again, her throat bulging as she kissed and suckled the thick base of his girth. Slowly, she nudged her head around and around in a small circle, and Damien outright groaned.

With her legs pointing up, and one hand caressing her clitoris, her other reached down and teased his testicles. Sharp, very very sharp claws traced along the soft skin, hard enough he could feel the sharpness, but not hard enough to hurt. She must have felt him clench in preparation for pain though, cause her throat clenched up as well; probably trying to laugh. Gently, she cupped and teased his cum-soaked testicles instead, caressed, and massaged them, sending pleasant, soothing waves up through his pelvis that felt very much at odds with what was happening. He was bound to a bed in a haunted, abandoned hospital, and a giant spider lady was hanging upside down over him.

He couldn't help but push his hips upward toward her as a third orgasm hit him. Vrall kept him buried, and made no effort to move. Based on what her hand was doing between her legs, she liked what he was doing, that he was struggling to fuck her throat despite being tied up. Struggling, wriggling, she liked it when he did that, and he couldn't not do that as her slender neck and tight throat milked him.

Eventually he collapsed, and the spider lady slowly lifted herself up, lips squeezing tight as she did. Gripping, warm flesh along his cock's tip in post orgasm was almost painfully pleasurable, and he moaned quietly as she eventually lifted herself off him. And when she tightened her lips even harder over his glans, he groaned loudly.

Chuckling, the spider lady slowly turned herself upside up again, hovering in the air over him. How she managed to smoothly adjust eight massive, long, multi-segmented, extremely pointy legs, without so much as making a sound, he could not fathom.

"Vampires are such wondrous children of the Dark Mother. A belly full of blood, and your hunger is replaced with desire. A belly full of my host's blood, and you're a slave to it. Exquisite." Slowly, she lowered herself, and set the little lips of her tiny slit against the underside of his cock, pinning it to his abs. Hot, and dripping.

He didn't believe vampires came from the Dark Mother, and Vrall knew that. But now was definitely not the time for a theological debate.

She slid forward, dragging her drenched pussy over his length, and without using her hands, arched her hips back and slid back, guiding his cock's head against and into her tight entrance. He shivered as the monster's gripping depths devoured him, and she wasted no time taking him to the base until he could feel how much he was stretching her.

Chuckling, she lifted her human-ish legs, set one of them on his chest and over his left shoulder, and then folded the other leg over it, also setting it along his chest and over his left shoulder. He froze as those razor sharp legs settled an inch from his left ear. The spider monster didn't have feet. Instead, her long shins came to razor sharp points, similar to her spider legs, and if she wasn't careful, she'd stab him.

Of course, Vrall didn't have to use two arms or two legs to do anything. Her eight spider limbs lifted her up, brought her forward a couple inches, and pulled her back and down in a circular motion, a fucking motion. And she watched him as she did, keeping her two legs where they were, crossed at the knee, gorgeous thighs pressed together, while she hugged herself, arms under her breasts. Chuckling, she traced the blunt side of her claws along her breasts, drawing lines through his cum toward her dark, swollen nipples, all the while she bounced back and forth on his cock, controlled by her spider legs.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew Antoinette probably did this with Jack, sit on him like she was getting comfortable on a chair or couch, and fuck him in that position. But Vrall had an advantage, with her spider legs allowing her to bounce on him without needing to use any other muscle. She truly was just sitting on him, like he was furniture, or helpless prey ready to be eaten, but either way, it was strangely arousing. It was strangely awesome.

He'd never stop wanting to feel Fiona squirm, struggle, beg, and cum when he was in control, but he had to admit, there was something terribly alluring about a powerful woman in full domination mode.

“Who is tighter?” Vrall asked, voice steady, smile wicked. “Fiona, or myself?”

“I...” That was a trick question if there ever was one. “You're both quite tight?”

She laughed again, and ran one of her claws up along her horns, not unlike a woman running fingers through her hair. Vrall had no hair, but the myriad of horns were fascinating and marvelous, and he stared at her as she combed her claws over them.

His eyes closed as her insides clenched, and wet heat trickled over him. The spider monster let out a raspy groan, and slowed her bouncing. Eventually she came to a stop, still sitting on him, and she smiled at him when he finally opened his eyes.

“Oh, not four?”

“Um, no, not yet.”



“Well, close your eyes, little fly, and enjoy. I aim for five. Or perhaps, six?” Grinning, she started bouncing again, and Damien groaned as his eyes closed again her soaked, squeezing insides milked him with expert control.

Vampires could get addicted to sex, with the Blush of Life letting them do some pretty interesting feats of sexual endurance. And with Vrall exploiting how strong and strange Fiona’s blood was, and the effects it had on him, he didn’t know that that sort of addiction was a very real possibility.

“And,” she continued, “I think we will have to continue this treatment, several times a week at least.”

He melted into the bed, and gave into the spider monster. Of all the things to be concerned about, getting on the good side of his love’s monster half wasn’t one of them. He already was.

“I can agree to that.”

“As long as you treat my host well,” she said, “I will treat you well, vampire. I have not even begun to share with you the pleasures I am capable of.” He winced as the woman clenched on his length hard, and she chuckled on him before letting out some more raspy groans. Her juices flowed over him, almost boiling hot, and it wasn’t long before his joined them. “There. Four. I think I will aim for six. And you will not be going anywhere until they are had.”

Lord, protect him from sexy horny monsters.

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~~Antoinette~~

“Wait here, Daniel.”

The man sighed, a quiet and subtle thing, before he sat within one of the pews. Which surprised her. Daniel shared much of her hatred for the Lancea et Sanctum, from centuries of conflict dealing with their absurd beliefs. The Ordo Dracul valued knowledge. The Church valued faith, and if they discovered knowledge that cast faith into doubt, they destroyed it.

Simply standing within the cathedral that once represented their existence in Dolareido had rage bubbling underneath her skin.

Daniel adjusted his glasses, and nodded toward the cross far above the pulpit.

“Sometimes,” he whispered, “I have to admire their faith. Sometimes, I wonder if, perhaps...” He shook his head, and straightened his spine. “If something happens, I’ll hear it.”

She nodded, and continued down the isle of the nave. Despite her desire to simply ignore everything about the cathedral and its contents, she could not help but stop and look up at the cross. A symbol of faith, of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his Father. But to her, it represented nothing but frustration, an enemy, the banner hoisted by fools who would cast the world back to the dark ages with their fear and self loathing.

And yet...

Sighing, she continued on, and stepped down the path into the depths of the Earth, to Maria’s den. Once it had been Lucas’s, before the purge, and now it belonged to Lucas’s lover. Following the purge, there had been an unspoken understanding between the two women that, as Maria did not interfere with the purge, the least Antoinette could do was leave the cathedral standing for her. It was an agreement she did not intend to cease, but the following conversation could change that.

At the first gate, she frowned at the destruction and the shoddy, temporary repairs. Bent bars, ripped apart and destroyed by large hands with claws. Feats of strength Antoinette could accomplish now, but not during her neonate years. Even during her ancilla years, bending such massive bars would have required great amounts of vitae. To werewolves, they were minor obstacles.

An elder Daeva or Nosferatu could surely overpower a werewolf of any age, but only with the might of centuries under their command. Neonate and ancilla Kindred would have a much more difficult time managing the insane power and strength Uratha came to almost immediately upon their first transformation. A pack of werewolves, all with such power? A threat to any elder, to her, to Daniel, and to Maria.

Antoinette waited. No need to knock, not with Maria’s elite guard standing within the long tunnel. Soon one of the ghouls came to her, bowed at the neck, and opened the gate. Antoinette returned the nod, and said nothing as she followed the ghoul to the next gate, where yet another ghoul opened the path. Four ghouls, four gates. Four more ghouls waited within the great dome, and Antoinette was not so confident as to ignore the threat they posed. One of them was armed with a flamethrower.

“Prince,” Maria said from within her coffin. The large, black coffin sat upright against the back wall of the dome, and the pale woman stood within, leaning back lightly against its soft, white lining. It

matched her dressed. After meeting Antoinette's eyes, Maria looked to her nearest ghoul. "Go, and take the others to the first gate. Wait there until the Prince leaves."

The ghoul nodded, and took her companions into the dark of the long tunnel.

"Madam Turio," Antoinette said, and she stopped twenty feet from the armless woman. "You know why I have come."

"Yes, I imagine I do." With a heavy sigh, Maria stepped out of the coffin. Antoinette almost stopped her, but Maria would not let an injury as blazé as losing her arms keep her from standing tall and proud. "I do not envy your dilemma, Prince."

"You refer to the curse."

"Yes. Jack the Ripper, as predictable a name as that is... is far more horrendous than I imagined. Mister Terry described its power and its desires to us before, but I couldn't have imagined."

Antoinette held her poker face, but the conversation had moved in a direction she did not expect. And Maria knew it. Was this how it was to be, then? A jousting game, until the conversation eventually reached its inevitable topic? Very well.

"Twice, I have seen this curse's power first hand," Antoinette said, "and its grotesque personality. My love's measures to keep it under control have proved successful, but they limit him. I understand he engaged the Uratha without those limits, and in the chaos, the curse was unleashed."

"Correct. I... appreciate what Jack has done for me, Prince. He knew the risk, and yet he went to war for me." The woman stepped around a nearby desk, sat, and motioned toward a nearby chair with her head. "He is a valuable asset to the Invictus. And he is valuable to the Lancea et Sanctum, in a way."

Antoinette smiled, grabbed the nearby chair, and set it near the desk to sit. As infuriating an idea as it was, that her lover had helped the Sanctified, Maria recognized it. But that was not the reason Maria would not wish to kill Jack. No, Maria's reason to spare the boy would be far more personal. All Antoinette had to do, was get the bloody woman to admit it. Easier said than done.

"My love has surprised us all, time and time again. But it is not his prowess that draws me to him, Madam Turio."

"Oh?"

"The boy is unfalteringly honest, down to his soul. He strives for fairness in all things, and will pour his everything into any task he deems necessary."

The Nosferatu smiled at that, and looked down at her desk. “Yes, quite true.”

“And... he does not needlessly engage in violence. He’s committed to the city, to the Invictus, but also to his humanity. He spares those he can, when he can.”

Maria’s smile faded, betrayed by a frown. “Who is he to cast judgment, on who deserves to live?”

Antoinette leaned closer to Maria, forcing her to look up, and she met the woman’s eyes. While Maria may have been expecting a harsh glare from her, Antoinette instead softened her gaze, and offered her fellow elder a piece of her genuine side.

“He is a loving man who seeks to save all those he can. You have not seen him, as I have, Madam Turio, racked with grief.”

“You honestly expect me to believe Jack regrets killing Lucas?”

Ah, there it was. To get the Nosferatu to admit the true nature of the conversation, and abandon subtext, was the first chip in her armor. To convince her, Antoinette would need more.

“I expect you to use your eyes, consider what you know of Jack, and to combine that with what I am telling you. The boy—”

If Maria had arms, she would have slammed them on her desk.

“You! You, who first attempted to take Lucas’s life, fifty years ago. You, who set a purge upon the Lancea et Sanctum. You, who slaughtered Kindred old and new alike, because they had the nerve to believe in God! You expect me, to listen to your poisoned words?”

Antoinette leaned back, and let the woman’s wrath pour over her. It was a familiar rage, one Antoinette knew from many strifes in her past; the details were lost, but the emotions were unforgettable, seared into her mind. Maria felt rage she could not reconcile, rage that fought against her reason and judgment, against her wisdom and experience. Rage that had burned for decades, and would not be crushed without struggle.

As much as Antoinette felt more than confident she would win a battle against an armless opponent, even one as strong as Maria, that did not mean a battle of wills would end the same. Maria’s Nightmare was renown, and terrifying. Of course, the woman was seriously maimed, and such damage left her in extreme disrepair. For all the elder’s posturing, she was likely barely able to remain out of torpor for this conversation. A stiff breeze could defeat her in this state, but that did not mean she could be so easily managed in the future. Antoinette had to choose her words well, lest the elder’s Nightmare be a true concern in the future.

And for all the frustration the blasted woman provided Antoinette's life, Maria did not deserve death.

"Yes, moi, Maria." Enough games. "And yes, I despise your religion. I despise fools such as yourself, so void of intelligence that you latch onto a feeling, an emotion, and call it faith. The fact you have the audacity to act upon faith as if it were proof itself of a higher being, and worse, that a higher being condones and encourages your behavior, disgusts me. How dare you." Before Maria could retort, Antoinette put up a hand. "But that is not the reason I enacted the purge, and you know that. Lucas vied for power, and plotted my demise. He wanted Dolareido for himself, and his methods became brutal, and savage. I hunted him, and killed those that protected him and served him, because it saved the lives of Kindred and kine, and my city. And..." She leaned forward again, and met Maria's anger from mere inches away. "And he had become unstable, as you know Viktor had before his death."

"He..." Maria glared at her, but it was clear Antoinette had won the joust. Sighing, Maria sat back and sank into her chair, defeated, but not by Antoinette. Defeated by her own wisdom and understanding of the reality Antoinette described. She had merely needed a push toward it. "He was not always so savage, Antoinette. He did not always desire to rule, or to crush others under his heel. He did not always dream of... He..." Her eyes fell, and fell, and her soul fell with her.

Antoinette matched her sigh, and set her hand on the woman's desk. The implication was clear: if Maria still had her arms, they could have exchanged a touch.

"I know, Maria. Tony was not always a bitter, resentful man, either."

"You killed him, didn't you?"

Antoinette smiled. The woman was dangerously intelligent, when she wished to be.

"A misleading word here. A touch of bait there. Viktor and Tony clashed, and to my delight, both died to their own foolhardiness." No need to bring Jack's involvement into the conversation.

"I can't imagine doing that to someone you loved."

"I... did not enjoy it, Maria, but it had to be done. And we had loved each other, many years before, but not by then. His descent into cruelty was a process of decades. For Lucas, I am sure you would have felt the same way, if given time, and if you had not been given fifty years to—"

"To look upon my memories of him with rose-tinted glasses?"

Antoinette sighed again, and offered the Nosferatu a weak, knowing smile. "No one is immune to the influence of time, Maria. I am lucky, in a way. Tony became my enemy, leaving me with few

options, and with years of the man antagonizing me and my city, I did what had to be done. But, it hurt, Maria. Not a night goes by I do not blame myself, at least in part, for the Kindred Tony eventually became.”

“And Elaine? Viktor’s sire?”

“I suppose that secret has spread throughout the city, at this point.”

“Of course.”

After a heavy nod, Antoinette sat back and shook her head. “She knows it was my plan that led to his death, and she feels as I did about Tony. A childe we both created. A childe that grew and evolved into something horrible. Failures both, and we are partly to blame.”

Maria snorted on a laugh, and Antoinette raised a brow.

“Sorry. It’s just, three women, elders, all who’ve had the men in their lives devolve into cruel, savage beasts? God has a sense of humor.”

Antoinette laughed. “I suppose she does.”

Maria blinked at her, and returned her laugh, though it was short lived, ended by a harsh wince of pain.

“Jack is safe from my wrath, Antoinette,” she said, and Antoinette again sighed, this time in relief. “Though it may be in his best interest to avoid me. I... was more comfortable, when I thought you or Daniel had taken Lucas’s life. Knowing it was Jack, I’m still not sure how I feel. Are... are you sure it was Jack, and not the curse?”

“It was Jack, Maria. Lucas had won that battle, thanks largely due to you giving him permission to abduct Natasha.” As predicted, her words made the elder frown, half in anger, half in shame. “Jack managed to surprise Damien with his fortitude and strength of will. And... and that was that.”

She nodded. “As I surmised. If... if you would leave me now, Prince. I must think on this.”

Nodding, Antoinette stood, and offered the woman a half bow. “Thank you, for listening, Maria. And now, I must... deal with another problem, for another.”

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“Natasha dear, could you come join me?”

“Um, s-sure. Where are you Prince?”

“I await in cell 16.”

The pause in her student’s voice spoke volumes. She had informed her student of what was to be done. Now it was Natasha’s turn.

“On the way, Prince.”

Nodding, Antoinette ended the call and lowered the phone. “She will be here soon.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” her sheriff asked. The uncertainty in his voice was quite out of place. “She won’t respond as well you think.”

“I do not think she will respond well, Daniel, but she will respond. This is an important moment in her growth, and an important moment in our balance with these wolves.” She gestured to Matthew and Arturo.

The two men stood there, arms apart and over their heads, held up by chains. Both were conscious, though both were in terrible shape, riddled with injuries that had obviously been caused by silver. For all Damien’s faults, she knew firsthand how dangerous the Mekhet was. It did not surprise her he had managed to inflict such damage upon Avery’s pack before his defeat.

The men were clothed, typical jeans and t-shirts. She had been tempted to strip them, to rob them of dignity as well as their freedom, but such crass methods were unnecessary for this action.

“You don’t think we could transform and break free?” Arturo said. He pulled on the chains idly, causing his body to pull into the air a few inches, but the chains holding his ankles soon halted the movement.

Antoinette gestured to Daniel. “My sheriff does not need a silver sword to decapitate you, fool, transformed or otherwise. And...” She stepped forward, and set her fingers against the man’s chest. Tall as Arturo was, they matched heights. “I need no sword to rip you in half, stupid man.” Before he could respond, she waved the hand and took a step back. “Enough. This bravado is pointless. You are trapped, and Avery does not know where you are.”

Matthew sighed and shook his head. “She can track us.”

“If she realized you were missing. She does not, yet.” If only these wolves understood how meaningless their words were. “Do not worry. Your fates rest not in my hands, but Vola’s.”

Both men winced, and looked down. If guilt were a spice, the two boys could be ground for ample supply.

After a couple minutes of silence, save for the panicked heartbeats of the two wolves, Natasha appeared in the hallway. And in her hand, she carried a stake.

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~~Natasha~~

She stepped into the cell, and forced herself to look up at her boyfriends. They managed to meet her gaze, but only for a second, before they both looked away.

“Can... can I speak t-to them alone?” This wasn’t the cell they’d once put Sándor in, with powerful chains capable of holding true monsters. If the boys transformed, they’d be able to break free, even with their injuries.

But they wouldn’t. If they did, Daniel would open the door and cut them into ribbons.

“Yes, Vola. Do be careful,” Antoinette said.

“They won’t—”

“Not of them. For them.” The Prince smiled at her, and once Daniel stepped out of the room, she closed the door.

A few LEDs built into the ceiling lit the room, enough she could see the boys’ faces, and how uncomfortable they were. Physical pain, yes, but it was shame and guilt that had them looking so... defeated.

It made her feel good for a whole two seconds. Satisfaction melted away, replaced with only sadness, and a desire to hug her stupid boyfriends. But Antoinette taught her well, taught her to recognize those emotions, accept them, and ignore them. Maybe after a chat she could listen to them, but for now, those emotions would only blind her.

She slowly walked around the two boys, and her footsteps echoed softly in the cube room. She looked down at the strange stake, and tapped it lightly in her hands as she came around to stand in front of them again, before continuing to circle them.

“Tash,” Art said. “We’re—”



“Shut up,” she said, startling herself. More venom slipped into her words than she meant to. Channeling Jessy a bit there, maybe.

She walked around them a few more times, tapping her stake intermittently as she juggled possible conversation threads. What would happen if she started yelling? She ran a few scenarios through her head. What would happen if she softly asked for an explanation? She ran a few more scenarios. What would happen if she started crying? She ran a few more scenarios again, and frowned at herself. That last one was dirty, emotional manipulation.

Eventually she stopped in front of the two boys, and held up the stake.

“This w-wood is treated. There’s a very thin coating of something on it, just enough so that it d-doesn’t smell like wood.” She stepped up to Matthew, and lightly pressed its tip against the huge man’s shirt at the navel. “Do you have one, too?”

Matthew met her gaze, and nodded, before lowering it again.

“How long have you h-had it?” she asked.

Matthew turned his head, looking away. He’d only do that if this was pack issue, which meant Avery told them to get these.

Natasha reached underneath her suit jacket, and pulled out her silver knife. Both boys pulled their heads back instantly, and she quickly held up one hand palm forward.

“I’m n-not going to hut you. Do you... d-do you really think I’d do that?”

Art grimaced as he stared at the blade. “I did stab you, Tash. I... wouldn’t exactly blame you, if you returned the favor.”

She rolled her eyes, took a step back, and leaned back against the wall. “I think D-Damien and Jack got enough revenge for that.” She gestured to them and their bodies. Their t-shirts didn’t do a good job hiding the nasty bruises, car-crash level bruises, or the nasty tears in their flesh. The particularly nasty wounds were wrapped in gauze, and she could smell the blood and damaged skin. Silver had done that.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Damien’s fast. But... honestly, Jack was the bigger problem. Sure, we’ll heal faster from what he put us through, but if he’d wanted to...”

Art groaned. “We’d be rat shit by now.”

Tash expected such a remark to be laced with sarcasm, but Art's voice had been solid, and he met her eyes with a rigid stare. Jack had scared them, badly. Not even their violent encounter with Jacob in his cave had left the boys this unnerved.

"Jack is..." Sighing, she shook her head. "Is not your concern. As long as you leave K-Kindred alone, he'll leave you alone."

The boys looked at each other, and then to her, obvious disbelief in their eyes. They weren't simply afraid of Jack, they were concerned about him, the way villagers would be concerned about a nearby volcano about to erupt.

"The Prince," she continued, "didn't capture you to t-talk about Jack. She captured you, b-because you assaulted one of the Ordo Dracul. She has exercised her right as P-Prince of Dolareido, to take revenge on transgressions against her covenant. Against... m-my covenant."

Matt sighed and let his head droop. "Tash, we—"

"I know. You didn't want to hurt me. Avery t-told you to keep me out of the way, and you knew you only had one way to... t-to do that." She stepped up to them again, and looked up at each of them. Each managed to hold her gaze for a few seconds longer this time, before they both looked down. "You attacked me, a dr-dragon. And you... you betrayed my trust, your girlfriend. You d-don't get to do that! Ever!" Heat shot up through her, and she poked the tip of the stake against Art's stomach.

Art pulled back enough to stop the wood from penetrating skin, but bound as he was, he didn't get far. And slowly, as silence settled on them, the two boys lifted their eyes from the floor and looked at her. Sadness, sadness she felt, and understood.

This wasn't just an issue about their relationship. Worse, it had almost nothing to do with that. As much as a part of her wanted to make it personal, to make it sting even more so she could be angrier with them, that wasn't analyzing the situation accurately. They did what they did because they were a member of Avery's pack, a group with their own motivations, same as any covenant. And when it came time to decide between their relationship with her, or their pack and their pack's goals, they picked their pack.

And that hurt. It hurt so damn much, because she knew, if the situation had been reversed, she'd probably have done the same thing. If Antoinette told her the city was in danger, that her friends were in danger, and that she had to trick and lock Art and Matt up for a night so she could do something they didn't want her to do? Yeah, she'd have done it, and she'd have hated herself every minute of every night from thereon out.

That's what the boys were feeling now. The sadness, shame, it was carved into them in big bright letters, made even worse because their mission had failed. They'd lost everything.

Maybe if she was Antoinette, or Elaine, she'd punish them. Maybe if she was Jessy, she'd hurt them. Maybe if she was a witch, she'd cast a spell on them. Maybe if she was a Carthian, she'd wreck their car; they didn't have a car, but still. Maybe if she was Invictus, she'd seize their assets and leave them living on the street; even less of a concern to them than a car.

But she was Tash. She just didn't have that kind of hate in her, and she knew it. Even now, she wanted to free them, apologize for what Antoinette and Daniel did, even apologize for what Damien and Jack did, and take care of their wounds. She wanted to snuggle up on her bed with them, cuddle, have lots of gentle sex, then rough sex, and Kiss them to end the night in bliss. She wanted all this stupid pain to go away.

"I... I carried a silver sword, b-because I had to. Because I was told to. I bet it made you nervous, knowing I always had that. But I never hid that from you! You knew I had it! I..." Sighing, she shook her head. Avery probably told them to keep the stakes hidden; that explained why they were treated so vampires wouldn't be able to smell them.

Every way she looked at this argument, it always ended on how the boys chose to listen to their boss when push came to shove.

"You'll... b-be staying here tonight," she continued. "And maybe longer, until I say otherwise. If Avery c-complains... fuck her." She glared at each man, frowned her best frown, and left. Once the door was closed behind her, she leaned back against it and hugged her arms tight to her, body shaking. Don't cry. Don't cry.

"Natasha?" Daniel said.

"Sire. The boys will be staying here t-tonight. If that's acceptable?" Her best official voice wasn't doing too good either, wavering.

"Yes, Natasha." He looked at her, adjusted his glasses, and did nothing. Or that's what she thought he'd do, cause that's what he always did. Her sire was reliable, but had all the empathy of a stone; it still boggled her mind he sired her. But after looking at her for a moment, his expression softened a little, and he sighed quietly.

He looked sad.

"W-What?"

“Natasha, I... I’m hardly one to give advice about this sort of thing. But, take it from someone a lot older than you, someone who’s made a lot of mistakes in this department. If you love them, make it work.”

She stared at the stranger in Daniel’s skin, jaw slowly dropping. “Sire?” Thank god the cell door was soundproof when closed.

“We’re not kine, Natasha. We live a long time. You can’t make an excuse about career, or even a covenant getting in the way, because what do those matter to immortals? If you genuinely love them, make it work. Because, in a hundred years, they’ll be gone, and you won’t be. You’ll spend a hundred years more hating yourself and the happiness you could have had.” He cracked a tiny smile, before wiping it away with the thumb of his glove. “The memories are worth it.”

Daniel didn’t like to talk much. He preferred to let people come to their own conclusions, and that included how he handled his role as sire. At this point in Natasha’s second life, Daniel was sire in name, but there was no dependent connection between them. She was her own vampire, and Daniel was her superior in the covenant, nothing more.

To hear him talk like this, like a sire would to a fledgling, struck her still.

“They... they attacked a dr-dragon. I—”

“And they should be punished for it. But if they love you, they’ll take that punishment with a smile if it means they get to stay with you.”

“They betrayed my trust!” She stomped her foot and glared up at the man, fists clenched.

“You know why they did. Is it something you can put behind you, and something they’ll apologize for, genuinely? Or not?”

“I... I...”

He put up his hands lightly, palms toward her, and shook his head. “Like you said, they’ll be staying here tonight. Think about it.”

“I will. I... w-will.”