

~~Antoinette~~

“It burns?”

“Burns is too strong a word,” Daniel’s voice said over the phone. “But the contents burn. I witnessed some incendiary explosives as well.”

“Terra Den’s work.”

“Undoubtedly.”

She groaned as she rubbed her forehead. Seated in her beautiful chair, in her beautiful office, at the top of her beautiful tower, all she felt was rage. How dare Garry, how dare he flirt with the edges of her commands.

“Response from the city?” she asked.

“No police or firefighters yet. And I haven’t heard any gunfire.”

“And the Kindred?”

“I’ve seen nothing to suggest a Masquerade violation.”

If someone violated the Masquerade, the situation would have been far easier to resolve. Execute the infidels, and silence those who complained. But the more Garry and Michael dodged her rules, the more her power slipped away. How much longer before the Carthians or Invictus proclaimed her an unworthy Prince?

Would that be so bad? Dolareido was her city, despite Jacob’s claim of co-ownership. It was her experiment, her time and effort that had produced its balance. And for all its troubles, it was one of the more peaceful cities when it came to the covenants. She was proud of her work.

But the more things slipped through her fingers, the more she wondered if her efforts were in vain. Would it not be better to simply leave, establish a more secure power base in a smaller area with no other Kindred presence, and enjoy blissful centuries with Jack?

As much as the idea pleased her, she knew it would not be enough. Despite what absurd and juvenile romantic fairy tales suggested, one could not find contentment in romance alone. One needed to find their own reason to exist, something that drove them and gave them purpose. And while her research into realms of ephemera were of great interest to her, it was her quest to prepare for the future

that drove her. Dolareido was the fruit of that preparation, and she would not abandon it on a flight of wistful whimsy, or disparaging anger.

If she had to kill Michael and Garry, and whomever believed in their cause, so be it.

“What do you think, old friend?” she said to the phone on her desk.

“I think Garry has been careful. Anyone who sees this will think the building’s been attacked, but nothing here suggests paranormal activity.” Doubtlessly, the man was giving one of his stone glares at the building as he spoke. “Conspiracy theorists and journalists alike will have fun theorizing about underworld crime, but nothing more.”

“Daniel... do you consider Garry’s attack to be a breach of my rules?”

“Much as I hate to say it, no.”

“Do you think I should change my decree?” Kindred were staunchly advised to avoid killing each other in Dolareido. She had said as much in Primogen meetings and public gatherings alike. But there had been no official declaration. As long as they upheld the Masquerade, and did not interfere with her city on any meaningful scale, Kindred were allowed to kill each other. And indeed, sometimes they did, despite the assurance from the Carthians and Invictus that no murders had been performed. Pretty lies.

Cooperation, that was what she strived for in Dolareido. Cooperation. It was one of the reasons she kept as much distance from the covenants as she did. History and psychology alike taught the folly of a heavy hand. If she changed her ways and adopted the role of totalitarian, she knew it would end in disaster. Perhaps now, perhaps in another hundred years, it would eventually end in catastrophe.

“I think if you get between these two angry, fighting dogs, you’re likely to get bit, Ann. Michael can probably pull ten, maybe twenty of his strongest to fight us, and Garry could likely convince most of his covenant that we should be disposed. And nothing unites people quite like a common enemy.”

She groaned again as she cradled her forehead, and combed her hair over her shoulder with her other hand. “Agreed.”

“I did see Sándor nearby.”

“Understandable. If he is to replace Azamel, then I am sure he wishes to be aware of what the covenants do.”

“Should I... ask him, about the tears?”

“No. Jack and his companions will handle the hunt from that angle. Natasha will approach it with the aid of the werewolves.” Forced aid, but aid nonetheless. “We will continue our own pursuits as we have.” Dangerous games and deadly uses of Daniel’s Auspex.

“Understood.” Daniel hung up, and Antoinette turned to her laptop.

Camera feeds showed the contents of several of her cells. Humans, kine she had abducted years ago, and rendered catatonic with drugs. Kine who deserved it. Would she sacrifice another, and summon Black Blood once more? The spirit refused to cooperate, but she was not without the power to force a discussion. The dark creature was not omnipotent.

Sighing once more, she shook her head and closed the laptop. A knock at her door announced Elaine’s arrival, and Antoinette smiled.

“Come in, my dear.”

“Ann,” Elaine said as she entered. “Trouble?”

“As always.”

“Garry being a pain in the ass, mm?”

“Naturally.”

“I could seduce him, perhaps?”

“He is homosexual, Elaine. Quite immune to your charms, I suspect.”

She rolled her eyes as she sat down at her desk across from her. “This is why you should abandon this city. It is slippery, and refuses to bow to your ideals. The Ordo would much prefer you focus on your studies.”

“I am sure they would. But the Ordo remain blind to the future.” Before Elaine could retort, Antoinette waved a dismissing hand. “How goes your attempt to steal Jack’s curse for yourself?”

Elaine half grimaced, half smiled. “Come now, you know it is not that simple.”

“Is it not?”

“No, it is not. Do not presume to know my intentions, or that I am so shallow as to be motivated by greed and nothing else.” Her smile did not falter. “And besides, if you truly felt that way, you would not have let me as close to the boy as you have.”

Antoinette grinned at her. “Do you think I ever let my guard down around you, old friend?”

“Why, yes, I believe you do.” Elaine returned the grin as she leaned forward over the desk. “At least a little.”

They laughed. It was good to laugh. The games they played, as insidious or manipulative as they may be, would not break their friendship. Others could not understand, but none of them had friendships as old as Antoinette and Elaine had theirs. What games Elaine played would come to light eventually, and until then, Antoinette would keep an eye on her. But she also trusted her, and had much more pressing concerns.

“Jack,” Elaine asked, “is he not at Xnomina, and the fire?”

“No, he is elsewhere.”

“If he were, would you interfere?”

“I have instructed Daniel that, if Jack is found in a situation where his death is inevitable, he is to save the boy. And from there, Jack will be prohibited from operating with the other covenants. Effectively dead.”

“All to maintain your glorious neutrality and indifference.”

Antoinette squinted her eyes at the woman. “I see you have come to make a point about something.”

“Of course. I see this growing war between the suits and the anarchists, and I believe it is foolishness.”

“Naturally.”

“I meant your refusal to take sides.”

Ah yes, this again.

“In the last city you laid claim to territory, what balance did the Kindred strike?” Antoinette was referring to Berlin, a city her old friend had taken up residence in for several decades during the 1900s. She also knew how this conversation would go, they had had it before, but such was the guilty pleasure of elders and elder kine alike, repeating conversations.

“The First estate ruled, and the Second Estate was their close ally, similar to Dolareido. But the Carthians outnumbered them, like a growing swarm of vermin. It is far easier for a lout to recruit a fellow lout, than for the others to grow their numbers.”

“Did they fight?”

“Frequently. There was no active war, as per usual, but the Prince was always one transgression away from demanding it.”

“And you saw no possibility for peace?”

“No.”

“Then, which side would you have picked?”

Elaine leaned back in her chair as she looked down. “I am not sure. They left me to my pursuits, and I never interfered.”

“Did you consider any of their views more worthy than the others?”

“No.”

“Then—”

“I was not Prince of that city, Ann. You are Prince of this one. I did not care if Berlin’s Kindred killed each other, nor if the city suffered for it. I only cared for my experiments. But Dolareido is your experiment, and you are the Prince of it.”

“You ask me to play favorites, when that itself would damage my experiment.”

“Better than war.”

“You said yourself that in Berlin, it did not come to war.” True outright war was terribly rare among Kindred. Elders ruled, and elders were far too paranoid to risk their second lives in a struggle that, to them, was ultimately a fleeting moment in a lifespan measured in centuries. The purge Antoinette had herself enacted was an exception, not the norm.

Naturally, Elaine had been thinking of the purge as well.

“Ann, you fought Lucas and killed his bishops, and you did so because the man was a stone’s throw away from assaulting you with over a hundred Kindred. If peace and cooperation was possible, then—”

“Cooperation is possible. It is simply a matter of time and effort to find the balance.” And that time was running out. The fact her fellow Kindred could not appreciate the impact the exponential growth of technology would have on their futures, was forever infuriating.

“And if it is not?”

“Then we are all doomed, Elaine.”

Elaine sighed and waved a dismissing hand of her own. “Do not be so negative. You have done well here, and the other dragons acknowledge that. But... we have both seen this behavior before, in other cities. Now that the Invictus are considerably weaker, with the Lancea et Sanctum essentially dead, Michael and Garry will fight, and many of the Kindred you are attempting to... herd, will die. Better you take a stand now, and bring one covenant to its knees.”

“So that I may rule with fear, and begin the cycle of tyranny that has killed so many other cities?” And elders alike. She was not so foolish as to ignore the tinge of fear that crept up her spine at the idea of her city’s Kindred rebelling and uniting against her. Such rebellions did happen, rarely, but they did. Kine were not unique in that regard, nor for their fondness of chopping the heads off their rulers.

Elaine frowned, but managed a slow nod, acknowledging the point. “There is a reason dragons rarely rule, Ann.”

Antoinette leaned back as well, sighing as she combed her hair over her chest. “This squabble between the covenants is but a wound earned from tearing free of old traps around our legs. With time, the covenants will cooperate.”

“And the Lancea et Sanctum?”

“I spoke with Maria. She is far more reasonable than her lover was. So is the boy.”

“Lucas’s childe?”

“Oui. He is... a pleasant surprise. As much as it pains me to admit, Damien is a perfect example of what I strive for, Elaine. He still holds to his beliefs, idiotic as they are, but he is also willing to cooperate with me, and understand the value in an open mind.”

“Even if you somehow made these puppets dance to your tune, what of Jacob?”

“Jacob.” Sighing, Antoinette looked down at her hair as she gently slid her fingers through it. “What do you think?”

“Of Jacob?” Elaine chuckled and licked a fang. “I am sure Samantha is enjoying herself.”

“You know Jacob is likely connected to the strange ongoing in my city, to these dark veins pulsing within it.”

“Yes, of course. But how dangerous do you truly consider them to be if you are willing to let Samantha... ah, of course. Not willing. Encouraging.”

Antoinette closed her eyes for several moments before she offered her friend a questioning gaze. “Do you trust Jacob with her?”

“You saw him with Minerva. His relationship with Samantha is not the same, but perhaps that is a good thing. If you are asking whether the man will drag her down into whatever dark games he plays with darker gods, then I would say no.”

“And Samantha herself? I let her take those two artifacts.”

“Why are you asking me? You know Beatrice’s plan will fail.”

“I am asking, because I doubt myself.”

Elaine shook her head. “You are the Prince. You cannot let anyone know you doubt yourself.”

“Then I hope you appreciate that I am willing to share this secret with you.”

Her old friend smiled, and tapped her desk with a fingertip several times. “Allowing me to share a bed with your lover, hardly a challenge. But letting me see your weak side in regards to your precious city and its denizens, that required centuries of effort.”

“Must you taunt me so?”

Elaine laughed, stood up, slipped around the desk, and leaned her butt against it by Antoinette as she smiled down at her. “I can provide my thoughts on this war between the Carthians and Invictus, but as for Jacob, Beatrice, and the dark arts they pursue? I am afraid I am as in the dark as you. You play dangerous games, Ann.”

“I do. But there is a glimmer of hope.”

“For Dolareido?”

“Do not be absurd. Dolareido has far more than a glimmer, and will be fine. If I have to personally bind and bury Black Blood to make it so, I will find a way. I meant... for Jacob.” And, loath as she was to think it, God have mercy on her damned soul if Samantha paid the price for her plans.

Would Jack ever speak to her again, if something happened to her because of Antoinette?

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~~Jack~~

Jessy threw up her hands. “Ryan, the fuck are you doing?”

“What? She stuck around to spy on us. No one saw me grab her.”

“So? We spy on each other all the time!”

“Yeah, but she tried to kill us. She tried to kill Mister Terry.”

“They weren’t trying to kill him! They were—”

Jessy and Ryan argued back and forth about the implications. Jack, on the other hand, paced in place and juggled information, while Mulder and Scully watched the chaos.

Crap. Crap Crap. Amanda, dead? Oh fuck. Oh fucking fuck. If that was true, then shit was officially going to hit the fan. People knew Amanda, Jack had worked with her. She was just a young Mekhet, Gloria’s childe, and a damn nice woman. Pretty much the perfect person to kill if you... wanted... a war...

Jack squeezed his phone, but stopped himself short before he shattered it.

“Damien,” he said, “tell me exactly what Michael said.”

“He said little more, Jack. Just that Amanda had died in the fire.”

“No more details?”

“No.”

“And you didn’t ask?” He couldn’t keep the bite out of his voice.

But his anger rolled off Damien without a problem. Thank god for friends.

“Michael wasn’t in the mood for talking. Understandable, I believe.”

“Yeah, understandable.” And a great way to avoid being questioned. “Is everyone else safe?”

“Yes. The fires are out. The attackers were quite thorough and managed to set many offices on fire, but ultimately the damage is just to decor. And... Amanda...”

“Damien, I need you to go full Mekhet mode. What else did you see? Spare no detail.”

Damien didn’t hesitate. He instantly went into painstaking detail, about his approach, about how Sándor had watched from afar, and how Isabella had been there, possibly to take advantage of the chaos and flames, and kill Michael. He talked about the fire, about the strange incendiary devices probably from Terra Den, about Gloria in the bunker, about finding some Kindred trapped by the fire that he saved, and finally about reaching Michael’s office where the boss had dropped the horrible truth. Amanda was dead.



Jack didn't believe it for a fucking second. She may or may not have been dead, but he doubted she died to Garry's feint. No way in hell Garry told the fucks he sent to harass Xnomina with bullets and molotovs — or whatever crazy shit they used from Terra Den that seemed to burn so damn well — to be so aggressive they actually killed Kindred. The ones Damien saved would have probably been saved by the sprinklers. No, Garry's feint was just to make sure eyes were turned toward it while he came for an old fashioned brawl with Jack.

If Amanda was dead, Michael probably killed her, taking full advantage of the chaos so people would have to blame Garry. And if that was true, Jack was going to rip the man's head off.

"Thanks Damien." He put away his phone, and joined Ryan and Jessy. "Shit has officially hit the fan. Garry hit Xnomina, poking the bear to draw attention. But... Michael says Amanda's dead, died to fire."

Everyone stared at him, Tilly included. And slowly, the Daeva's eyes went wide as she realized what had just happened to her chances of living through this night.

Ryan let out a low whistle. "Amanda dead is pretty bad. Jesus. Think we should get revenge?" He gestured down to Tilly, and her eyes went even wider.

"Just start with how and why." He gestured to Tilly as he looked at Ryan and Jessy.

Jessy threw up her hands again. "Ryan got it in his head that after that the scuffle, gloves were off. So—"

"So, I was following Bella as she got Kathy and Tilly out of here. But Tilly stayed behind, probably to get a peek and see what we were up to, when Garry booked it. So I thought, might as well grab her and learn what she knows." Ryan nodded toward Jack. "You can do that, right?"

Jack shrugged. "You're the Mekhet. Isn't digging up secrets your deal?"

"Eh, sorta. Isn't Damien your buddy? Auspex doesn't let me just learn things at will. I have to point it in a direction, and it isn't exactly forthcoming with simple, direct answers."

That made sense. Mekhet and their ability to discover secrets were well known, but it wasn't like they could learn anything and everything. The Danse Macabre would be borderline pointless, otherwise.

Sighing, Jack squatted down in front of Tilly, and she shivered as she looked between him, and his two undead crows perched upon his shoulders.

"Tilly," he said.

"... Jack," she said. Her voice trembled.

A part of him loved that, the fear in her eyes, the obvious terror that she was so close to him, Jack, the Crow Lord, the Ripper, and a bunch of other nicknames he didn't particularly care for. But, a larger part of him hated it. Christ, couldn't they all just get along? Why the fuck did they have to fight this old mans' war?

"Tell me, when Garry sent his goons to attack Xnomina, did he give them instructions to avoid killing?"

"Y-Yes! Yes, he did. He gave us all a debrief. I mean, much as Garry really debriefs, you know? He said he wanted a piece of either this building, or you, and the others were to piss off Michael and Xnomina. No killing."

Every word came out stammering, and Jack struggled to keep his wince hidden. He loathed this.

"She lying, Ryan?"

Ryan eyed Tilly for a moment, concentrating, before he sighed and shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Don't think so?"

"Like I said, Auspex doesn't just hand me the answers on a silver platter, man."

Sighing, Jack eyed the woman as she squirmed. A beautiful Daeva, average height and ballerina build, short red hair, and a few freckles. The type who was perfectly comfortable using that body to make herself seem weak and meek. Of course, she was a vampire, just as strong as any male her age, and the look and squirming and lip trembling, it was all an act.

Except the fear. The fear behind it all was very real.

"D-Don't, Jack. Don't, I'm not lying, I'm not—"

"I'm not going to hurt you, calm down." He reached out, and grabbed her mind, same as he had not long ago. With the necklace on, the Ripper had no say, and the Beast wasn't a raging tide of insane strength. Breaking into her mind without shattering it was easier, and he didn't hesitate to punch through her mental barrier again, and grab hold of the little vampire hiding within.

The sound of her begging hurt. Fucking Christ it hurt. God he hated this. Julias would have hated this, too.

"Tilly," he said, staring into her eyes. His two crows cawed, like an echoing choir. "Tell me, what was Garry's plan tonight?"

“He... wanted to take the building, or fight you, or maybe both. The other team was supposed to make sure no one interrupted us here.”

“And your rules of engagement?”

“N... no killing.”

Sighing, he let go of the girl’s mind, stood up, and paced the floor they’d cleared of boxes and rat corpses.

“Damn,” Ryan said, “you really are good at that.”

Jack managed a small smile for the man, before setting his chin in his fingers as he thought. To Dominate another vampire to the point he could ask them important information like that, should have been difficult. But Tilly was only a neonate, plus the curse made it easy, and honestly, Jack knew he could probably Dominate her without the curse. He was really, really good at it.

Tilly stared at him, half terrified, half angry, now that he’d violated her mind like that. Of course she was angry. He’d be angry too if someone took a trip into his mind against his will, the only sanctum anyone truly had. It made him sick, but holy fuck, he was really good at it.

He avoided looking at her as he paced. How to fix this, how to fix this?

Sighing, he looked at Ryan, and Ryan met his eyes. Yeah, this was also going to suck, but he had to do it.

The man didn’t even see it coming. Jack grabbed his mind, and crushed his Beast under his heel.

“Ryan. Go help the others at Xnomina. Forget that you captured Tilly.”

Ryan nodded, and left.

“Holy shit!” Jessy backhanded him across the shoulder, earning a few annoyed squawks from Mulder. “Dude, what the fuck?”

“Jessy, do me a favor and go upstairs. If Hella or any of them show up, tell them to go wait on the roof.”

She eyed him, half frowning half squinting. But after a few seconds, she sighed, nodded, and left.

Leaving him alone, with Tilly.

“If... if you hurt me, Mason will—”

Jack squatted down in front of her again, and she froze up. Scully clicked at her a few times, and Jack smiled at his friend before scratching the back of her head. All vampires knew Animalism, but it

was the Gangrels and Ventrue who were naturals at it. A young Daeva like Tilly probably didn't have a clue how to communicate with animals, and seeing the two undead crows on his shoulders obviously scared her.

"Tilly. You know what I did to the werewolves when they stepped out of line. Mason was there. I beat them, broke them, tore off limbs, and—" He stopped as the painful memory cut through his guts. Playing the bad cop was surprisingly hard, sometimes.

"That... that wasn't you, that was the curse. Jack the Ripper."

Sighing, he nodded. "You're right."

"I am?"

"You are, mostly. This curse makes me damn powerful, Tilly, but the Ripper is a whole different beast."

"And—"

"And you're right, I didn't beat up Avery and her wolves. The Ripper did." He leaned in closer, and she winced and pulled her head back. "That doesn't mean I couldn't."

She gulped.

"But I wouldn't. I wouldn't because, apparently, I'm the only person in this whole damn city who thinks we don't have to settle everything with violence."

"Um, is that a joke? You're no pacifist!"

"Never said I was a pacifist. Hell, I'm completely against pacifism. You think something's worth having, you better be willing to fight for it." Groaning, he sat down on the floor, a few crates against his back, and the area cleared of rat corpses. "And what I think is worth having, is what my love thinks is worth having."

"The Prince?"

"Mhmm. She wants everyone to get along. She genuinely thinks we could all cooperate, stop fighting, and embrace the future together. And you know what? I think it's doable."

Tilly eyed him, like he was a tiger behaving far too much like a friendly house cat, liable to snap and kill her the moment she let her guard down. Typical Kindred.

"Uh huh." She didn't believe him.

“Problem is, most of the Kindred are convinced it’s not possible, and a few of them are such monumental assholes, they’re willing to cause strife so they can take advantage.”

“Garry isn’t—”

“I didn’t say Garry. If anything, Garry’s holding back, and trying to figure something out that doesn’t involve killing everyone. Oh, he wants to kill Michael, and destroy the Invictus, but he doesn’t want to do it over the ashes of dozens of Kindred who don’t deserve it.”

She snorted and looked the other way. “You expect me to believe you like what Garry’s doing?”

“I think Garry’s not half the asshole the Invictus think he is, but he’s doing what he thinks he needs to do. With Viktor gone and Lucas gone, he’s taking full advantage, cause he’s genuinely worried for you guys. Getting Terra Den under his thumb, nudging Avery toward Maria, he did that shit because he’s a good guy trying to help his people.” He shrugged. “Sure, he’s a dumbass, and is dipping his toes into nasty shit, walking down hypocrisy lane, but his heart’s in the right place.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“That hard to believe someone out there actually thinks we can all get along?”

“Yeah, it is. And why are you telling me?”

“Because something just happened that’s going to start this fire, and if I don’t break a few rules, a lot more people are going to die.” He held up a hand, and Scully jumped onto his finger. He pet her head with the other, and she nestled into the shape of his palm and fingers, taking shelter, as he looked to Tilly. Yeap, this was a dangerous game, but if he didn’t do something, shit would get a lot worse than tonight. “You heard what I said about Amanda. Amanda Pol.”

Tilly froze, and gulped again. If she’d been Blushing Life, she’d have gone as pale as a vampire.

“Pol? Uh, black chick, kinda short and tiny? Long black hair?”

“That’s the one. A good friend of mine, actually. She helped me with personal shit on a few occasions.” Like helping him spy on his mom and sis before everything went to Hell. Slowly, he slid his fingers down the back of Scully’s head, before scratching some of her feathers, his eyes locked on Tilly. “So understand how much faith I’m putting in my lover’s hopes for this city, when I tell you I’m going to let you go.”

“Let me go? But... but if we killed Amanda...”

“Then you’ve officially gone too far. Invictus will claim you crossed a line, and they’ll engage in war. The Prince will be put in a difficult position, because she wants to stay hands off, but she can’t just let the covenants go to war, not in the streets.”

“We never wanted the Prince to—”

“You were naive to think you could fight the Invictus, and she wouldn’t get involved eventually, Tilly. Christ, I’ve talked to her a thousand times about this. If you idiots only knew by how thin a thread you were hanging. You know in other cities, the Prince would throw up a bloodhunt against vamps for shit like this?”

Tilly glared at him and squirmed in place. “There aren’t any dragon Princes in other cities.”

“Probably not, true.” Far as he knew, other cities were almost always run by the First or Second Estate, and occasionally by Carthians; anarchist cities. For a city to be run by a witch or a dragon was almost unheard of. And it kind of made sense. The Invictus or Lancea et Sanctum would rule with the peace of the gun, and kill anyone who stepped out of line immediately. The Carthians would try ruling without a structure, and it’d fail. But dragons and witches? Dolareido was a weird city.

“So you’re... really going to let me go?”

“Yeap.”

“Because of Avery and Mason.”

“Nope.”

“Then why? Don’t give me this peace shit.”

“Because I owe Garry.” He gave Scully a kiss on the beak. “But more so, because I want him to realize someone in this city is actually not an asshole. Because I’m trying to create peace, whether you believe me or not, and if I have to be the first one out of the trenches singing Christmas carols, so be it.”

“Trenches?”

“World War I, the Christmas Truce... you know?”

She raised a brow. He buried his in a palm. Carthians.

“Um, then... thanks, I guess.”

“And Tilly.”

“Y-Yes?”

He reached out, and smashed into her mind once again. “You can’t tell anyone about this, except Garry.”

Slowly, she nodded, like a zombie. The suggestion, buried in her subconscious, would overpower her consciousness. She wouldn’t be able to tell anyone except Garry, and would have trouble even thinking about why she couldn’t. Eventually she’d piece together why, but the suggestion would remain nonetheless. Jack couldn’t let this secret get out and backfire on him.

It was a game, wordless, no one allowed to outright say what they were doing. a trading of intent with Garry and only Garry. Christ, he fucking despised every moment of this. The Danse Macabre could go to Hell.

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“I can’t say I’m too happy with how the situation resolved,” Michael said.

Jack held the man’s gaze. It was the next night, and Jack had had the opportunity to heal and put on some clothes that weren’t ripped to shreds. On his shoulders sat Mulder and Scully, and they both looked around the office room curiously. This was the first time they’d ever been allowed in the building, but considering they weren’t actually crows anymore, it’d be fine. And if it wasn’t fine, well, fuck whoever told him otherwise.

“The Tanvar building remains under our control.”

Michael, sitting at the table while Jack stood at the tail of it, shook his head. “A lot of merchandise was damaged.”

“Not all that much. And considering we stopped Garry’s attempt to take the building, it was well worth the damage.”

Michael raised a brow. It wasn’t smart, talking back to Michael, but Jack was out of patience with the man. Every time they met eyes, Jack held them, despite knowing damn well doing so would only make his boss angrier. Hell, he might eventually realize Jack suspected him of killing Amanda. Calm down, and tell your Ventrue half to back off.

Jack looked down.

“Ideally,” Michael said, placated, “you would have killed the man.”

“Garry was very powerful. He healed rapidly, and his transformations were difficult to predict. It felt like I was fighting Sándor for a while there. Only reason I survived is Jessy.”

“I’d heard you had resoundingly defeated the gargoyle when you fought in his dream.”

“That was the Ripper, sir.” And defeat was a strong word.

Michael glared at him. “So you didn’t unleash it upon Garry.”

“For the most part, no.”

“Even though your life was in danger.”

Yeah, danger you were hoping would either lead to Ripper killing Garry, or Garry killing Jack.

Mulder and Scully cawed, and Jack clicked his tongue at each of them. Shhh.

“I understand you want me to use the curse as a tool, Mister McDonald, but that’s playing with fire. I’ll use it as a last resort and nothing else.”

The absolute statement was enough to earn Michael’s glare, but eventually the man stood up, walked over the window, and stared down at the crowd below. People still stood around and looked at the damaged building, gathering outside the police tape that circled it.

“You’re trying my patience, Mister Terry.”

Not trying it hard enough if he was still willing to use titles.

“Sir, I understand what you’re asking for, and I understand why, but this is a personal matter. I cannot just... use the curse like a weapon.” He’d already told his boss about all the shit he had to go through to keep it under control. He carefully avoided mentioning that the Ripper was an actual voice in his head, but he made damn sure Michael knew Jack went through Hell to keep it contained. Michael had even given him time off, and a lot of it, to get it under control, but now he wanted Jack to use it like it was a Discipline he could summon with vitae.

“And now that Miss Pol is dead?”

Now that Miss Pol is dead, I want to rip your fucking head off, take over the Invictus, and use that position to get some peace with Garry.

But, no. Much as that idea sounded appealing, Jack knew he couldn’t defeat Michael, not unless he went full psycho Ripper on his ass. One of these days, he wouldn’t be able to wrestle control of his body back from the Ripper, and that wasn’t a risk he was willing to take. Besides, even if he did unleash



the Ripper, there was a chance Michael would still win. He had to do this the vampire way, the Danse Macabre way, by being a sneaky, scheming dick.

“We can force the issue a different way,” Jack said. “If we — you — call out Mister Tones for this transgression in a Primogen meeting, perhaps he’ll acknowledge he’s overstepped?”

“Perhaps. But I expect he’ll only admit to the harassment of Xnomina. A foolhardy Kindred not prepared and getting trapped in the crossfire? He won’t take credit for that.”

Of course he won’t. He knows it wouldn’t happen. No, the only reason Amanda was dead was cause Michael killed her.

“What’s the next step then, sir?”

“Our recon teams need a couple weeks to secure details, but I expect us to make a decisive strike against Terra Den. In the mean time, keep up defensive measures near the Tanvar building.”

That made sense. If Terra Den was giving the Carthians a new suite of tools to fight with, removing that advantage would make a prolonged battle harder for the anarchists. He almost expected Michael to say they were going to launch an attack on the Carthian half of South Side, and the buildings they knew many Carthians considered home. But that would likely only catch young Kindred sleeping; older Kindred slept in hideouts.

But it would come to that eventually. Now that Amanda was supposedly dead, the Invictus had no reason to hold back. In a month, Jack knew Kindred would be killing each other every chance they got.

Not if he could help it.

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~~Eric~~

The night Jessy had come back from her tussle with the Carthians, she’d been cut up and exhausted, with some literal holes in her body. He gave her some of his blood, but apparently she’d already fed; needed a lot of blood to heal from her wounds, she said. She also went to sleep under his bed. These days, she’d sleep in his bed, trusting him — and his extra layers of blackout curtains — to

keep her protected from the sun. But from what she'd told him, the Carthians couldn't be trusted to 'play fair' anymore.

Thralls and ghouls were outside on nearby rooftops during the day, watching the building in case other thralls and ghouls decided to attack. That'd be crazy. Vampire servants attacking during the day? He had trouble imagining it.

So, while Jessy slept under his bed like a corpse, he gave Avery a call.

"Eric? The fuck you want?"

He rolled his eyes. "God, you're a bitch."

"Yeah so I've heard. What do you want?"

"Just want to know what's going on."

"You're dating a big time vamp, ask her."

He raised a brow, and looked out the living room window into the sunlight. "It's—"

"I meant ask her after dusk, asshole. Or better yet, why didn't you ask her last night?"

"She doesn't like telling me everything." She told him far more than she probably should, normally. "Probably something to do with being a Right Hand."

Avery snorted. Just a phone call, no vid, but he could clearly imagine her annoyed expression. "Not sure what you want me to tell you."

"A little heads up? If the Carthians and Invictus—"

"We're staying out of this, Eric."

"Gonna be kind of hard. Isn't Mason dating a Carthian? Isn't Brianna dating some Invictus?"

"We're staying out of it. Let the fucking vamps kill each other."

He sighed. "Do you have to be such a bitch all the time? You need to get laid, Avery."

"Hey, fuck you! I have a boyfriend."

He almost laughed. That was a surprisingly juvenile retort, and from an older woman like her, it was hilarious, and cute.

"Uh huh." He was tempted to dump some dating advice on her, something along the lines of 'sex good, go have it, you cold bitch' but decided against it. He was dumb, but not that dumb. "Any progress finding out who's causing those tears?"

“Still got spirits wandering around, talking about Maria, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“You really still think it’s her?”

“I think she’s involved, but, maybe not directly, or even... I don’t know, ok? A new tear has been created since Maria’s been on the mend.”

“Which proves—”

“It doesn’t prove anything, jackass. Just means there’s a chance she’s not the one making them.” More groans. “Besides, that little vamp is gonna check it out with my boys.”

“Right. Heard about that.” Tempted, so very tempted to tease her about Natasha drafting her two ‘boys’. “I’m not allowed to participate in this Carthian Invictus stuff either. Jessy says as long as you don’t help Garry, I shouldn’t help the Invictus.” But he had a sneaking suspicion Michael would override Jessy’s order eventually.

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“But I am invested in this city.”

“Meaning?”

He rolled his eyes. “Meaning, if... if shit goes sideways, I’ll help, ok? I like this city. I like the people in this city. I’d like to keep them alive.”

Silence, but eventually Avery let out a long, annoyed sigh. “Thanks.”

“Holy shit, I think that’s the nicest thing you—”

She hung up.

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A week later, Tash showed up at his door.

“Hey Tash. Guys,” Eric said, nodding to the vampire and her two werewolves.

“Eric,” Tash said, meeting his eyes with a smile. It didn’t last long. He could see it in her eyes when her composure broke, and she started squirming. Awkward.

Well, they had seen each other naked. They’d all seen each other naked and having sex, but to him, it didn’t feel like a big deal. He’d seen orgies before ever meeting Jessy. That was Dolareido for

you, a city of sex, Slut City, and the sooner you didn't let it bother you, the sooner you got to enjoy the good side. According to Jessy, anyway.

And sure, he could tell Jessy wanted more intimacy than her old life ever gave, more personal romance. But at the same time, he'd be lying if he said he didn't like showing off with her, being the center of attention, and being admired. He'd been a professional fighter after all. Fucking Jessy on camera for Tash, or doing it person? He was surprised at how perfectly comfortable he was embracing his girlfriend's shamelessness.

So, Tash might have felt a bit awkward, but he didn't. Hell, even if he would have in the past, Jessy had rubbed off on him enough that an orgy with neighbors wouldn't make him blink.

He stepped back and motioned for them to come in. They did, and the boys threw themselves onto his living room couch without a word. If they felt awkward about stuff, they didn't show it. But then, they were a pair that'd — according to Jessy — been double teaming women since before Natasha. Being seen naked and fucking probably didn't mean much to them.

“Jessy ain't here,” he said.

“I know. B-But, you know I'm not here to talk to her anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She wouldn't have brought the boys, otherwise.

“Jessy's busy with the Carthians,” the little woman said as she followed him into the kitchen. “But, I know the werewolves and monsters have been t-told to stay out of this fight.”

“Yeah.”

“I am kinda surprised you, um, d-didn't really commit to the Invictus by now.”

He put up hands and shook his head. “The devil pays my salary, but that don't mean I'm just gonna throw 'em my soul. If they want that, I'll need more than money.”

She smiled. “The Invictus have a lot of money.”

“S'long as I can pay my bills, I'm good. Don't need a fancy house or a yacht.”

“Didn't you used to be a p-p-professional fighter? And, um, kinda a big deal?”

“Yeah, but it wasn't about the money.” He shrugged as he sat on a stool, and left it at that.

Natasha nodded as she sat beside him. “I need your help.”

“Need my help?”

“Er, well, want.”

“Not sure I understand.”

“I’ve been going into the Hisil lately. You... know about what happened with M-Matt and Art?”

He nodded. “Jessy filled me in.” He threw the two men a glance, and they looked back at him. Yeap, that was shame in their eyes. Guy shame, subtle, hidden in a cold, sad gaze. So Eric put up his hands again. “And I don’t plan on taking sides on anything, including whatever Avery’s pack is up to.” Neutrality may have been a boring hill to die on, but he already had a grave plot there and everything.

The boys managed some small smiles, but again, in typical manly fashion, the sadness was hidden in the eyes. Not sad about him, sad about Avery.

“This isn’t about that. It’s about tracking d-down whoever, whatever, is leaving these scars in the city. And I know you can help us.”

“Me? Cause I’m Uratha?”

Art raised a hand. “Well, that, and because we know you’ve been sneaking into the Hisil and being a dumbass, tracking down and killing spirits.”

Eric winced. Those spirits were a menace, spreading influence for things like hate and greed. He’d been slipping into the Hisil at some loci in the city. Finding them wasn’t that hard, once you knew what to look for, people behaving strangely and odd behavior cropping up almost unprovoked. Devil’s Corner had more than a few small ones.

“I’ve been in Dolareido my whole life,” he said, eying the other two wolves, “and apparently, some mystical moon bitch decided I’m gonna be a werewolf and deal with the crazy shit out there. Spirits, crazy spider hybrid monsters, whatever.” The more he talked, the less he sounded like his usual reserved self, and the more he sounded like Jessy. “So if I want to take a trip into the Shadow Realm, and do a little spring cleaning, in my town, I will.” Everyone in the room looked at him, faces hunting for more. Eventually he shrugged. “Not like I’ve been hunting big game. Not yet, anyway.”

“Eric,” Matt said. “It’s not Avery you need to be worried about, if you step over the line and fuck something up. It’s not even the Prince. It’s Black Blood.”

Eric gulped down the rising lump in his throat. For months now, he’d been avoiding Avery and going on these hunts, learning what it meant to be a werewolf in a spirit world, how to hunt and even eat spirits, and he’d killed a few spirits old enough to have names. The name ‘Black Blood’ came up frequently. So did the others, Red Tide and Street-Tail King, but Black Blood was the spirit that had the city feeling like a monarchy.

“I’m keeping my head down enough to avoid Black Blood. It’s not going to care if I deal with a few spirits that got uppity.”

Eric hadn’t run into it Black Blood yet, or any of the three warring assholes in Dolareido’s Hisil half. He planned to keep it that way. Just like how he wasn’t getting involved with the Invictus or Carthians. If the Invictus wanted his help dealing with werewolf-y things, then he’d help. But the war? No chance, not unless they put a gun to his head.

Natasha wasn’t Invictus, though. If she wanted him to get involved in shit, he had every right to say no.

“You know the city, right?” Natasha asked.

“So do you.”

“Yeah, b-but not like a werewolf would.”

He sighed. “You want me to help you track down these tears.”

The question hit her hard, and she looked down as her little hands fidgeted on the counter for a few seconds.

“Sorta. Matt and Art already know where a new one is. We scouted nearby, but it’s... it’s dangerous. They w-want to inspect it, but there are red wraiths nearby, and... and...”

“I’ve seen a tear before.”

“Y-Yes.”

“So’s Jessy.”

“And I’d take her! B-But, she’s busy, like I said.”

Which sucked. He didn’t get to see her as much as he used to, and when he did, she was angry. Angry about Amanda, angry about Garry, angry about Michael, even angry about Jack and the kid’s refusal to go on a killing spree on some ‘punk ass Carthians’.

“Talk with the Begotten yet?”

She shook her head. “No. That’s another reason why I came to you. You, um, you know them b-better than we do.”

“Ha, do I? Azamel offered me a job. I said no.”

“Better than us,” Art said. “We tried to kill one of her pack.”

Her pack? Uratha did think of pack as family; they essentially were. And Fiona was a part of Azamel's strange, messed up little family. Eric had trouble thinking of anyone in that context though, except maybe Jessy.

"I don't know how much help I'll be with Azamel."

"And you helped rescue Sándor! From that g-g-ghost place. And you w-went through a tear to do it."

That was true, much as he hated to admit it.

"Guess I am kinda involved. I hate that."

Matthew laughed, and everyone raised a brow as they looked at him. "I mean, come on. You're dating Jessy. You really think you coulda said no to her best friend? She'll kill you. Jessy, I mean."

That, apparently, hadn't crossed Tash's mind, cause she looked back to Eric with a big beaming, mischievous smile. He'd seen that smile before. That was Jessy's smile. Damn woman rubbed off on everyone.

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Another trip into the tunnels. Dust, dirt, concave walls of concrete, flickering old lights, ancient railroad tracks, a bygone era of technology abandoned for taxis. Fuck taxis.

He wasn't exactly sure why Dolareido stopped using the subway; it was before his time. Maybe the way it was built just didn't match up with the way the city evolved. Maybe the vamps wanted to keep the tunnels empty for new vamps to live in. Probably a mix of both.

He sighed, taking a sniff. Both Art and Matt did too.

"Smell something strange," Art said. "That blood? Smells like... you?"

"Yeah. Athalia and I got into a tussle down here. She helped me snap out of my..."

"Kuruth." Art said.

Eric nodded. Somehow, the gray matter in his brain understood the word, and it sent a chill down his spine. He'd never shared the word with Jessy, but it was the reason he hesitated when she wanted him to transform for sex.

"You know the B-Begotten more than I thought," Tash said.

“I guess.”

“Kuruth,” Matt said. “It... it’s strange.”

“How’s that?” Eric asked.

The man crouched over the tracks where Eric had fought Athalia so long ago. “You’ve felt the berserk rage in you... once.”

“Twice. I fought Caleb and—”

Matt shook his head. “Caleb told us what happened. That wasn’t Kuruth. That was... Kuruth-lite.”

Art choked on a laugh. “What he means, is when you’re in Gauru form, you can’t not attack something. You have to fight. Not attacking while in Gauru is like holding your breath. You can’t do it forever.” Most definitely not Eric’s experience. “And if you completely lose control, you kill something. Doesn’t matter what, doesn’t matter who, something has to die. That’s Kuruth. The urge to hunt consumes you. All you can smell is blood. All you can see is blood. It grabs hold of you, and... well, you know what you did to Pitt.”

Yeah, he knew. That’s what it’d been like the first night he transformed. When he got into a fight with Caleb and then Michael, he’d lost control again, but it hadn’t been anywhere near as bad as that first night. He’d still been in a little control, and had felt other feelings than just blood lust.

“I get those feelings,” he said, “when in Gauru, but never... never that bad, never something I can’t control. I mean, yeah there’s an animal drive when I’m with Jessy, but I’ve never wanted to attack her, when transformed.”

The two men nodded.

“Last week,” Art added, “Tash had us test our control. It went well. It went too well.”

“Too well?”

“Yeah. It felt strange, you know? Normally if we go Gauru, we get consumed with a need for violence. What I expected to happen, was Matt and I would basically have to hold our breath, suppress the urge to fight until we couldn’t anymore, and go to a different form so we wouldn’t. But it didn’t happen.”

Matt stood up, nodding. “Something... something in Dolareido, maybe? Something told me to stop trying to suppress the urge, and instead, just... breathe through it.”



“Not like we haven’t breathed when in Gauru form before,” Art said, “but here, in this city, each breath was... unusually calming, I guess?” He shrugged and gestured to Eric. “I’m guessing this has something to do with you.”

“Uh, not with me. But I know what you mean, yeah. Avery said I have Cahalith dreams, and... I mean, I know my dreams have been visited by Sándor. Fucker got into them and really screwed me up.”

Art nodded. “But...”

“But, before him, something else has been in my dreams. Something... grand, I guess. Something that really wanted to give me the impression she was the moon.” And of course, his brain auto used ‘she’, cause something in him insisted ‘it’ very much thought of itself as ‘she’. “I dunno. Just, every so often, she gets into my dreams. Not much lately, and not to say anything important when she does. But back then, she... she thought it was imperative, I guess, that I learn to breathe through the rage. Like... like she wanted me to get to somewhere on the other side of a river I had to swim through, or something.”

The two boys looked at each other, before smiling back at him.

“Cahalith,” they said. In unison.

“Yeah, I know, I just said that’s what I am.”

“And Clara and Avery,” Art said. “But they haven’t said anything about any sort of presence visiting them.”

“But...”

“But,” Matt said, “sometimes they do have strange dreams. Visions and stuff.”

“Ugh. I’d prefer to just be left alone. Let me do my thing. I wanna hunt some nasty spirits? Let me hunt some nasty spirits. I don’t want some moon presence visiting my head.” He didn’t feel comfortable talking about himself this much, not with these people anyway. With Jessy, sure. But Jessy trusted Tash, and Tash trusted Matt and Art. “Can’t a guy just be left alone?”

All three of them shook their heads, and he sighed.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” Tash said, and she offered him a sympathetic smile.

She wasn’t wrong. Another twenty minutes of casual walking, and they came to the large room Azamel called hers. A concrete stage covered in furniture, with plenty of open space around it, including a railway that cut through the room along the stage; probably for carts, not actual trains.

But no Azamel. Her chair was there, and the smell of cigarette ashes was powerful, but no old woman. Mark was there, and Athalia. Sadly, no Fiona. The redhead was fun, and a hundred times easier to talk to than anyone else in her family.

“H-Hi,” Natasha said. “Um, we came to talk. B-But, where’s Azamel, or Sándor?”

Athalia, sitting in a chair on the stage with a book in her hand, shook her head, but didn’t look up from its pages. “Azamel’s in her lair, resting. And before you ask, no, she doesn’t have much time left. She’s surprised she’s lasted this long.”

“Old people can be stubborn,” Eric said. “I should know.”

Natasha looked at him, confused, but everyone else knew what he meant. Even Athalia, who’d probably had the most fucked up life of any of them, smiled. She didn’t like the vampires, or Avery’s pack, but she didn’t seem to mind him. Maybe even liked him, if the woman was capable of it.

“You’re still welcome to join us,” Athalia said. “We can’t pay you, but your old man is feeling better, isn’t he? I bet you have plenty of money saved up for him.”

“Yeah.”

“Then you can ditch the vamps and sleep in our lairs. You won’t need your gilded cage anymore.”

That was a tempting offer, a lot more than it had been, with the vamps pushing on each other hard enough to break something. Now that he had money and his dad wasn’t sitting in a hospital costing him an arm and a leg, Eric could be free of the Invictus chain around his neck, and just do his own thing.

Except, he knew that was ignoring the future. It’d only be a matter of time before the vampires got him involved in the war, one way or another.

But, he trusted Jessy. And hell, he trusted Jack to do something about the war before it ruined everything. Maybe he wouldn’t have to get his hands bloody with vampire ashes?

“I’ll pass.”

Athalia smirked. “Knew you would. Sucking at vamp tits really that good?”

It was tempting to make a crass comment about Jessy’s tits, but he just shrugged and shook his head. “They haven’t done wrong by me yet.”

“Yeah, well, just wait until Michael shows up at your door and demands your help.”

“I’ll say no.”

“That’ll be hard if your dad ends up in the hospital again, under mysterious circumstances.”

“Jessy wouldn’t let that happen, and neither would Avery.”

“Last I checked, you’re not in Avery’s pack. She won’t go to bat for you. She—”

“P-Please,” Tash said, stepping forward and putting up her hands. “Jack will do something about the war. This isn’t about that. This is about the... mysterious threat.” She air quoted the last bit. “It was the B-Begotten who first told us about it. We’re here because we want your help.”

“Want?” Athalia said. “Sounds to me like you need our help.”

That earned a growl from Arturo. He took a step forward, and Eric didn’t have to look to know the man had shifted his weight onto the balls of his boots.

“Uh, no, want. You’re not the only things around that can jump between realms. Matt and I can handle whatever we—”

Natasha looked back at the man, and Art shut up immediately. Damn. If Jessy were here, she’d probably make a comment about the man being whipped. Well, not comment, she’d just make the whip crack sound.

“I d-don’t like to do things unprepared. After seeing blood wraiths scouting the tear, it’s obvious that something strange is going on. I’m n-not going to risk making a mistake when we don’t have to.” Nodding, she managed a small smile. “Or at least mitigate.”

“So, what, you want our help investigating the tear?”

“Yes please.”

Eric almost laughed. Natasha had grown bolder since he’d known her, but she was still a cute, tiny, soft, and quiet thing, and hearing her soft voice make some very heavy requests was funny. She wasn’t asking for help moving a couch. She was asking for a Begotten to risk their lives.

Athalia groaned and shook her head. “I—”

“I’ll go.”

Everyone looked to the opposite tunnel as the sound of footsteps rang. A few seconds later, Sándor joined them, face its typical neutral. Eric didn’t know the man very well, but the fact the guy was reserved, quiet, and stereotypically stoic told Eric enough. Sándor was not the sort of man you wanted to fuck with. What was that line? Beware the fury of a patient man?

“Sándor,” Athalia said as she got up and hopped down off the stage. “You don’t have to. Azamel dumped this problem on their laps for a reason.”

“Azamel will be dead soon.”

“And—”

“And I am not Azamel.” The man slowly shook his head as he stepped up beside Athalia, touched her on the shoulder once, and smiled. A tiny smile, like it was something he struggled to do. She frowned, looking away, and Sándor’s smile faded, before he walked past her. He spared a glance for Mark too, but Mark — the damn man smelled like rot and death — shrugged, indifferent.

“You’ll help us?” Tash asked.

“Yes.”

“Um, n-not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but... why?”

“Because there’s something here worth defending.”

“Here?”

“Dolareido.” He nodded toward Eric. “The Uratha must have felt it by now. There’s... something going on, in this city, something more than just these tears. Something... good.”

Maybe he was talking about Luna. Maybe it was something else. Whatever it was, the man wasn’t wrong, but it was a damn hard thing to notice when vampires were triggering wars around them, and everyone was convinced the tears popping up around the city were sinister in nature.

The three werewolves nodded, earning a confused glance from Natasha.

“I d-don’t know about that,” she said. “But... b-but if there is something happening, I suppose vampires probably wouldn’t notice, would they?”

The werewolves shrugged, but Sándor managed a small nod.

“Probably not. Except, maybe, the Circle.”

Natasha looked down and squirmed. Talk of the Circle always made vamps nervous, even more than talking about the Ordo Dracul. Much as vampires thought the dragons were creepy in a Frankenstein kinda way, weird scientists doing crazy shit, it was the Circle of the Crone that seemed to really make vamps anxious. Witches, warlocks, blood magic, insane stuff any normal vamp avoided.

Maybe Eric should take a trip to visit them? Talk to Triss or something, and see if they knew anything about the weird entity that sometimes talked to Eric in his dreams.

“W-When would you be ready, to um, come help?”

“Now.”

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~~Natasha~~

She knew Sándor could take them into his lair, and then take them into the Shadow Realm through one of his tunnels, but they decided to let the werewolves take them. Matt and Art insisted. The Shadow Realm was their territory, and they didn't have any delusions about the boldness of that claim.

As much as the werewolves were unique for their strange ability to hop between the physical and spirit realm, the nightmare monsters could go anywhere. Absolutely anywhere! She shivered as cold memories ran through her mind, of the strange things she had seen whenever the Begotten or Black Blood were involved. Sure, she'd seen some strange things when she dealt with the Uratha, but it was whenever the monsters or that crazy spirit were involved that things got bizarre, and terrifying. Cosmically terrifying.

Sometimes, she wished she could go back to when she thought the only things out there were vampires, and maybe some other paranormal creatures like werewolves. Even spirits and ghosts weren't all that weird, compared to Black Blood — Jack insisted it wasn't a true spirit — and the other things she'd seen in the... the... cracks of the universe, or however one could think of it. No more of that, please k thanks bye.

They walked Devil's Corner. No need for Cloak of Night to keep them hidden, they weren't doing anything any vampires would care about. And they wouldn't be bothered by people on the street, not with four fit guys walking with Tash. Of course, sometimes she kinda liked it when kine tried to push her around, so she could push them back; a guilty pleasure for any vampire.

“Natasha.”

Natasha almost jumped. Sándor's voice. He'd come closer to her as they walked, and had started walking beside her without her noticing. Sure, she'd been lost in thought, like usual, but the man could be damn sneaky when he wanted to be, evidently.

“Y-Yes?” She scanned around, doing a quick check for the boys. Matt and Art followed behind, eyes on Sándor, and Eric led ahead.

“I wanted to talk about Beatrice.”

“Oh. Um... I’m n-not sure what I can tell you. Triss and I don’t talk a lot.”

“No, but you knew Julias well.”

“Oh... oh.” She rubbed an arm as she looked down. This was going to be a painful conversation, for the both of them. “Sure you d... d-don’t want to ask her about him?”

“I did.”

Of course he did. The man’s attitude could break down a concrete wall if he put some force behind it.

“Then I’m not sure w-what I could say.”

“I’m worried about Beatrice.”

“We... we all are. We know she’s d-doing something, something witchy, and... yeah.” No one talked about it, but they all knew she was probably trying to resurrect Julias. Everyone conveniently pretended to not know that.

“I know what she’s doing.”

“You d-do?”

“Yes, but it’s private. That’s not what I want to talk about.”

Ok, apparently Sándor knew more about this than she did.

“Then I’m not sure w-what I can tell you.”

“You knew Julias well.”

“I did.”

“Better than Beatrice.”

“I... d-don’t know about that. I never dated Julias.”

“But you were friends for decades. You worked together.”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Tell me about him, if you can.” Sándor looked down to her, and met her eyes for a few seconds. Such a solid, heavy gaze. He knew he was asking her to talk about a dead friend, someone she’d known for many years. Someone he’d killed.

She took a deep, useless breath, and began.

“Julias was... an enigma. He w-wasn’t anything like Viktor.” Though now that she thought about it, Jack wasn’t anything like Julias either. And Viktor wasn’t anything like Elaine.

“Triss told me he was... emo.”

Natasha choked on a laugh, and smiled up at the man. “Kinda, y-yeah. Did she tell you a lot about him?”

“Not a lot, but some. But I... felt I should get a different perspective, if I’m going to make a decision.”

“D-Decision?”

He shook his head. “It’s personal. I hope that isn’t a problem.”

“No, I guess n-not.” At this point, she trusted Sándor, at least a little. And if the man was getting involved with Triss, it was probably to help her. She knew he’d lost his family to the hunters, so if anyone could understand Triss’s pain, it was Sándor. “Julias was smooth. Suave. He could have the whole room kinda... w-watching him, like he was a celebrity. I knew he d-didn’t really like that. Or rather, he didn’t like that he liked it.”

A pause indicated she was offering Sándor a spot to jump in with comment. He didn’t. Listening did seem to be his superpower.

“He... was sad, about becoming a vampire. He was sad he t-took to it so well, too. As he got older, he started t-to envy kine, just as his hate for vampires grew.” She expected Sándor to chime in with that, but he didn’t. He did glance at her, though, eyebrow raised. “He d... d-didn’t want to be part of the Danse Macabre, but he was really good at it. So he kept getting deeper into it, and... eventually replaced his sire on the council. He didn’t want to, but he knew he could do the best good for D-Dolareido there.

“As for him and Beatrice, she was uh... sorta his opposite. Nosferatu either get super sad, or super angry, b-because of their deformities. She got super angry. She and Julias, when they finally spoke to each other, they kinda... got along, you know? In a way m-most people don’t. He really helped her learn how to... to think about things. How to not be angry all the time. And she helped bring a sp-p-park back into his life.” That sounded horribly cheesy, and stupidly poetic. Beatrice would hate it. Julias would li... would have liked it. “He was the sad, lonely billionaire. She was the firecracker p-punk that taught him to smile again.”

Sándor laughed. Good, cause she was going for a joke. It was a short laugh though, two seconds at most, but his hard face kept a subtle smile for a few seconds more.

“And then Angela killed him,” he said. The smile stayed, but it was a sad smile, the sort someone wore when they were empathizing with someone, with a pain they knew all too well. But at least he didn’t say ‘and then I killed him’. That would have been very... well, a very Julias thing to say. And from what little she knew of Sándor, it was something he would have said, months ago.

Time changed everyone, she supposed. So did Dolareido, evidently.

“He... t-t-taught her that she didn’t have to hate everyone, or herself. But now he’s gone.” Tash glanced back at her boys, shivered, and looked back to Sándor. “If it wasn’t for Jennifer, she’d probably be right back to hating everyone and everything. And if it wasn’t for J-J-Jacob, she’d...”

“Not be pursuing the dark arts.”

The dark arts. To everyone else, it was magic, or blood magic, or witchy witch stuff. Sándor really was very, very old.

“I’m really n-not the best to talk to about this. Julias t-talked to me and Jessy about his relationship, but not a lot. He p-probably talked to Jack more.”

“Jack.” Sándor sighed softly, noise lost to the quiet, menacing nightlife of Devil’s Corner. “The two people I should talk to about this, are the last two people I want to talk to.”

“Are you worried about Triss? I mean, on a... p-personal level?”

“... yes.”

Why the hesitation? His face went back to its usual stone cold visage, but for a second, there’d been something close to concern.

“D-Don’t you have enough on your plate, with your new Begotten friends?”

“I suppose.”

“But, if it’s Triss you’re worried about, and the sort of stuff she’s up to, b-because of Jacob, then you might want to talk to the Prince, or even Elaine. They know Jacob better than any of us.”

“That is a good idea. Thank you.”

They walked in silence for a little while after that. Sándor obviously had something in mind, something that involved Triss. For a second, she thought maybe he wanted to sleep with her, considering Jennifer had dragged him around with them during the last ball, and both women had been dressed to kill that night. But if that were true, he wouldn’t need to do anything other than let her drag him back to her den. Not true, then. Maybe Sándor wanted to be Triss’s friend?



That would be difficult. It was obvious that Sándor preferred to perch on the sidelines, like a quiet gargoyle, and not get directly involved. But he was getting involved anyway. Compelled by circumstance, maybe? Either way, he'd have more trouble making friends than even Natasha did, let alone with someone as damaged as Beatrice. But, then again, stories had been circulating about how comfy the Circle were with each other. Maybe Beatrice had become easier to talk with.

Her mind shifted back onto task. Natasha looked around at the people smoking on the sidewalks and street corners, at the convenience stores with bars on the windows, at the cars with peeled paint and dented bumpers, and at the prostitutes with crows feet making zero attempt to disguise what they were up to. This was the place Eric wanted to fix, and she couldn't blame him.

She smiled at the man's back as he scanned the streets, same as her. To Kindred, kine should be left to their own devices, and Kindred would blend in, wolves among sheep. The Invictus got a little more involved, and tried to rule with money. The Lancea et Sanctum got a little more involved, and tried to rule with religion dogma. The Carthians got a little more involved, and tried to sew anarchy, and other 'fight the machine' philosophies they were devoted to, no matter how shortsighted. None of them were like Eric, a man who had no views, no agenda, nothing. He just wanted to give a little back to the world he grew up in.

That was how Natasha knew he'd help. The vampires were all selfish, paranoid things. The nightmare monsters had their own world, and the werewolf pack had a creed they followed. Eric, on the other hand, was a Dolareido man through and through, and he really just wanted to help. That talk about Jessy being her friend, and Eric having to help her because of it, was just pretense. He'd have helped regardless.

It was almost, as Antoinette would say, *drôle*. With anyone else, she'd have to find a way to manipulate them, make a deal, convince them, all that nonsense she knew she was just as reliant on. If someone showed up at her door and told her people might die if she didn't help, she knew it wouldn't be her first reaction to leap to her feet and lend a hand. The Beast in her told her to be more cautious, to worry about herself first. The werewolves weren't like that, especially Eric.

She stepped up beside him. "How're you d-doing?"

"We're about to take a trip into a dangerous world, to investigate something we've all been stumbling around blind about for how many months now? Years? I'm pretty nervous."

She raised a brow. He didn't look nervous.

"You've b-been... sneaking into the Hisil for a while now, haven't you?"

“You could say that.”

“Killed Needle Swords yet?”

He looked down at her, frowning. She’d hit a nerve.

“No.”

“Oh. Um, m-maybe we can... can help?”

“Avery’s made it clear that—” He stopped as he noticed her smiling.

“Matt and Art are... m-my uh, slaves? Um, no, that’s too harsh. Indentured assistants, until the tears issue is resolved.” She tapped her fingertips together, very evil like. “If you help me, I’m n-not against helping you.”

“That,” he said, “is pretty damn manipulative of you.”

“True.” It was a very vampire way of doing things. A very Antoinette way of doing things. In truth, she couldn’t force the boys to do something that didn’t strictly deal with the tears. But they already wanted to kill Needle Swords, and this would be an excuse for Matt and Art to do it. Using them as ‘slaves’ to deal with Needle Swords was pretense. Pretense pretense always with the pretense.

“I was gonna help you anyway, though.”

“I know, b-but... but I’d prefer we trade. Call it a Kindred reflex,” she said. He laughed, and it was her turn to raise a brow. “W-What’s so funny?”

“It’s not only a Kindred reflex.”

“Oh?”

“Spirits only deal in trades, too.”

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~~Jack~~

Mulder and Scully sat on a curtain rod, cawed a few times, and fell silent as Jack sat with his girlfriend.

For the first time, ever, Jack told Antoinette about what the Invictus were up to. He left out key details, like Michael's plan to eventually attack Terra Den, but he told her about the Tanvar building, Michael's goals for the curse, everything Garry said, Xnomina, and Amanda's death.

"You think McDonald has killed Amanda?" Antoinette said, gesturing at the air in front of them. They both sat on a couch deep in his mansion in one of the random rooms, a room of red curtains and red furniture. Luxurious, and pointless.

"Yeah. Or, I dunno, staked her and locked her up somewhere." He groaned and shook his head. "Fat chance. I'm sure Michael would kill one of his own if it meant getting to have his war. And it's working. Gloria's majorly fucked up, and a lot of Kindred are already getting ready for a proper war. People liked Amanda." Like him.

"There is always the chance he is not lying."

"Yeah, maybe, but I saw the look in his eyes, you know? He was... cold." The memory sent lava through his veins. "Wanted to fucking kill him right there."

"My dear, when is the last time you fed?"

"I don't know. I've been—"

"Summon Veronica, would you? Feed, and then speak." If he didn't know any better, he'd think she was suggesting he eat a banana cause his blood sugar was low.

Sighing, he pulled out his phone and sent a summons Veronica's way. A 'summons', not a text or call, cause apparently there was an app for that. A knock came at the door a minute later.

"Come in, dear," Antoinette said.

Veronica stepped in, and bowed to Antoinette and Jack. "My Prince. Master."

"Sit." Antoinette slid aside, and motioned for her to sit between them.

Oh poor Veronica. Jack almost laughed as he watched the girl squirm as she approached. Jack was in a suit, as was Antoinette, while Veronica wore a simple maid's uniform, a button shirt and skirt with the black and white patterns of the Victorian maid outfits. A gift from Antoinette. The button shirt had a lot more cleavage than strictly necessary, and Jack knew it was a combination of the shirt's design, but also Veronica actively putting her cleavage on display. She wanted Jack to notice.

Of course, the fact Antoinette was there, made Veronica nervous enough to rub her hands together and avoid eye contact with her. Veronica loved to try and grab his eye, and Antoinette knew it, and she knew Antoinette knew it, and so on. Naturally, Veronica was terrified of the five hundred-year-old

vampire, but Antoinette thought the girl and her futile attempts to seduce him were charming and delightful. The woman didn't have a jealous bone in her body, not when it came to sex.

Jack opened his mouth to ask Veronica if it was ok to take a drink. He stopped himself. That wasn't very master like. It also wasn't what pleased his thrall. She was happier if he took from her, imposed upon her, held her down and gave her no other option. She was happier when he got possessive, and treated her like she belonged to him.

And he kinda liked doing that.

Once Veronica was comfy between them, he turned on the hilariously fancy couch, leaned in, and set his fangs to her throat. He couldn't see much, face turned toward the couch and buried in her neck, but Veronica's noises announced she was overjoyed at the sudden Kiss.

"My dear," Antoinette said. "May I suggest pulling on the thrall's hair?"

He raised a brow, but did as suggested. Between quiet sucking sounds, his closer arm reached up, netted fingers into Veronica's blue hair, grabbed a large handful, and gently tilted her head back to expose more of her neck. The reaction was immediate, and Veronica moaned openly as she quivered.

Whenever he got rough with Veronica, she loved it. He could smell the arousal on her. At first it made him a little uncomfortable, but every time he did something like grab her hair, choke her, spank her, the results were immediate and impressive. Yeah, he could get used to this.

But, now was not the time for sex. He finished taking of her, and he took deep. Veronica mewled and whimpered all the way down into a post-Kiss coma.

"Feel better, my love?"

He broke away from Veronica, and she slumped against his shoulder, out like a light. Her blood pulsed through him, and he smiled down at her before looking up to Antoinette.

"It's easy to forget I have a thrall now. That I can just... order her to come, and I can drink. No hunting involved, no borrowing from you. Nothing."

"The joys of being a powerful vampire."

"The curse's power." He winced, stood up, set the unconscious Veronica down on a couch chair, and held out a hand to Antoinette. She took it.

"Perhaps. If... when the curse's power is gone, you will rise to natural power quite quickly, Jack, be rest assured." Standing, she leaned down, kissed him, and the two set out for the lobby.

Would he? How much of his power was because of Julias's blood, versus the curse itself, versus his own natural talent? He managed a slow nod, and Mulder and Scully flew down to his shoulders as they stepped out into the lobby, with its grand door and grander stairway.

"Your birds," she said, "you are content with them?"

"What do you mean?"

"While done rarely in Dolareido, raising pets as undead is often a process not unlike grooming a potential child. But your two crows are visibly damaged, and forever will be."

He shrugged and shook his head. "Doesn't matter. They're my friends, and I wasn't going to let them die." She smiled down at him, and kissed him again. A proper, long kiss, and he blinked at her semi-closed eyes as she indulged. "Uh..."

"Many older Kindred would abandon these two, and find crows undamaged to become their undead familiars." Ah, she was happy he was showing compassion.

"I guess."

Familiars. The word made him smile. If Julias were still alive, he'd probably make a joke, like 'yer a wizard, Harry' or something.

"These two may draw attention from kine."

"I thought about that. But, they don't look too bad, right?" He nudged his head toward Mulder. "His neck looks a little crooked, that's all. No one'll be able to tell there's something wrong unless they touch him." He nudged Scully next. "And Scully's wing looks broken, but lots of birds have broken wings and stuff." He'd already taken a stab at fixing it so it looked more natural, and it did, with no more point sticking straight out of it. But it was still definitely broken, like Mulder's neck. Anyone who touched them, or watched them for a minute, would quickly figure that out.

"I do not disagree, but be wary. If they violate the Masquerade, it will be on your head, my love."

He gulped. That wasn't a warning from his girlfriend, that was a threat from the Prince.

"Understood."

"And while I am glad you have told me what you have, it may be... prudent, that you do not tell me more. Our relationship puts a strain on your position with the Invictus as is. If McDonald discovers you shared delicate information with me, the consequences would again, be on your head."

"I haven't told you anything you can't figure out on your own."

“That is a dangerous game to play.”

“I know.”

“But, you are also correct. I have eyes and ears everywhere. I know, for example, that Tilly escaped the Tanvar building, only to be re-acquired? I suspect whoever caught her the second time disguised the act with Obfuscate, but she left the building a second time, and that, the eyes and ears I have within my city, did witness.”

God damn. She really did have eyes and ears everywhere.

“I... let her go. I got a phone call from Damien, telling me about Amanda, but then Ryan brought in Tilly, and I let her go.”

“Why?”

“Because if there’s going to be any peace in this damn city, someone has to make an act of good faith, right?” Even if it backfired and got people killed, it was better than just letting everything build in the pressure cooker until it exploded.

“Master.” Mulder said. “Master. Nice.”

“Smart.” Scully said, nodding.

Jack smiled at his two friends. “I uh, didn’t expect Mulder and Scully to get smarter, when I brought them back.”

“A gift from your blood. They may now serve you as proper agents, instead of animals drawn by instinct and only the barest wisps of intellect.”

“As long as I keep feeding them my blood.”

“Indeed. It has been ages since I have owned undead familiars.”

“You had your own?”

“Oui. Cats.”

A vampire lady with immortal cats. Too funny. He laughed, and she smiled.

“Though it may interest you to know Elaine has a great experience with familiars. When I first met her, ages past, wolves followed her.”

“She mentioned that. I figured she meant living wolves.”

“She did. But several were undead, risen by her hand, and they served her faithfully.”

“Did... something happen to them?”

Antoinette sighed, and opened the front door. “The details are lost to me. The details will likely be lost to her as well, but it would do you well to talk to her of them nonetheless. If only so she may teach you what it is like to own familiars.”

He joined her at the door, and they shared another kiss, before she slipped into the car waiting for her. Leaving him alone in his mansion, with a real shitty to-do list to burn through.

His phone rang, and he answered it. “Damien.”

“Jack, I wanted to talk with you.”

“For the love of god, please tell me nothing else has happened.”

“No. I wanted to speak with you about Elaine.”

“You mean what Auspex showed you? Dude, I have no doubt Elaine paid Isabella a visit, and put the idea in her head to kill Michael if the opportunity presented itself.”

“And you still trust her?”

“Kinda, yeah?” It was hard to gauge Elaine, with everything that’d happened. “I was just going to talk with her now, actually, about familiars.”

“I don’t trust her.”

“Good. If we all trusted her, that’d probably be a bad thing.” It also meant the one-on-one conversation he was about to have with her would, as always, be that strange balance of ‘trust her don’t trust her’ that drove him up the fucking wall.

Why couldn’t people just get along?