

~~Beatrice~~

“Hey Clara.”

The werewolf raised a brow as she looked at her, but before the woman could find a polite way — or not so polite way — to get rid of her, Harcourt clapped once and leaned back in his chair.

“Ladies! Visiting?” And again, before Clara could find a way to tell her date that she didn’t want the vampires around, Harcourt grabbed a nearby chair. For three women. Total dunce.

Jennifer didn’t hesitate. She sat down at the small circular table and got comfy, leaned back in the fancy wire metal chair, folded one knee over the other, and finger waved at Brace.

Clara frowned at Jen, and ground her teeth subtly enough only the dumb dude at the table wouldn’t notice. But, Clara didn’t know Jen, didn’t know Jen was doing it on purpose, to make Clara jealous because she figured it’d get the two together faster, not because she wanted to steal Brace from her. Drama. Jennifer embodied soap opera drama. She really did have more similarities with Daeva bitches like Isabella than a Ventrue like Elaine.

How the fuck did Triss and Jen ever hook up? They kinda didn’t, not really. Sorta just evolved that way.

Triss took a moment to check her hair and make sure it was covering her cheeks. The Discipline Obfuscate had a lot of ways to keep people from noticing her, Cloak of Night being the most used. But Face in the Crowd made sure that while people could see her, they just wouldn’t care about her, and as long as she made sure her teeth weren’t obviously visible, it’d stay that way.

“We were scouting,” Jennifer said, nodding to the hunter. “The Invictus and Carthians insist on being a nuisance.”

Clara put up her hands. “We’re staying out of it.”

“You and the pack, or you and Brace?” The Ventrue grinned as she gestured with her head toward the hunter.

Harcourt shrugged. “Uh, both, I guess? The Prince has done right by Marge, Dennis and me, and she doesn’t want us getting involved. As long as people — kine, I guess — stay out of it too, I got no problem.” Without so much as a glance to Clara for permission, the hunter grabbed another nearby chair, slid it over, and gestured to the two remaining ladies. Clara looked annoyed, but with Brace, not the girls. She probably didn’t realize just how nice the hunter was, until now. Nice to a fault.

But then, maybe that's what Clara liked? Jack was nice to a fault, or at least he used to be. Still kinda was, but also kinda wasn't, curse or no curse. Growing up was painful, especially for someone like Jack, and every time Triss caught up with the kid it was easy to see he was growing more bitter and upset with the world. Harcourt, on the other hand, seemed impervious to that kinda shit, considering the rough life he'd had while still being a nice goofball. Maybe that's what Clara wanted?

Or the girl was just dating a nice guy, cause Jack was off the menu and she finally accepted that.

Samantha glanced at Triss, and Triss gave her a playful shove. Go sit, dumbass. Smiling, Samantha took the other chair and got comfortable.

"I hope it stays that way," Sam said. "No kine getting hurt, I mean. I'm uh, pretty new to this vampire thing, but—"

A waiter came up to them, but Clara shook her head, waving him off. Yeap, she was annoyed. Well, sucked to be her, an info update was important, and one of the best ways to get one was randomly, like this, catching people off guard so they couldn't formulate crafty answers easily.

"But uh, I'm more worried about Jack," Sam continued. "He's going to try and fix everything himself, like he always does."

Clara nodded, wincing a little as she took a memory dive. "He does seem to do that."

Triss raised a hand. "But we're all staying out of it, right? I mean, you know, barring a really shitty exception, we're gonna let the two idiot groups duke it out. And Jacob says it's not the first time they've butted heads, and they're still here, so it can't get too bad, right?"

Everyone looked at each other, frowning or wincing. Yeah, she didn't believe herself either.

"How is Marge and Dennis?" Jennifer asked. "I see you and Clara are enjoying yourselves," a bit of a pause to make it obvious what she meant, "but I do wonder about those two."

Harcourt nodded, taking a bite of his steak and chewing it fast. "They'd been hanging out with Leauvion's crew for a long time. Jack apparently thought they were being, uh, hogged? But now they're seeing what the other vamps are up to. Invictus mostly, though. Not that I blame them. Dolareido's got this whole Las Vegas vibe going, and the crew and I had been doing backwater bullshit for years. Trying out hot tubs and fine dining," he gestured to his meal, "seems to be more of an Invictus indulgence here."

"It's not everywhere?" Samantha asked.

“I’ve been in a few cities. Clara too. We’ve seen some weird setups, you know? Dolareido’s the only one I even know of with dragons in charge; we rarely even hear of them, let alone run into them. But in other cities, the Invictus aren’t always rich and wearing suits. Sometimes it’s more like a military state. Sometimes the city doesn’t have any luxury at all, and the Carthians and Invictus becomes more like, local anarchist punks versus the local mob.”

“Tijuana,” Clara said, “was a little more... extreme. The Invictus were brutal, and thrived on markets a lot nastier than the shit you find in Dolareido.”

“Oh?” Sam asked, with the enthusiasm of a mother getting drawn into a documentary about crime. “How... how bad was it?”

Clara picked up on Samantha’s innocent mom personality quick, and she laughed as she leaned in a little toward her. “Heavy drugs sold to kids, sex slaves, and we ran into one incident involving organ trafficking.”

“Oh god. And you were fighting the vampires there?”

“It didn’t start out that way, but everything went to shit quick when the vamps realized we were in the city. They didn’t want to talk, just wanted us out. Then we ran into a new Uratha, Arturo Ibarra, and things got even more confusing. Eventually we had to leave.”

“Wow. That... that does sound a lot worse than Dolareido.”

Harcourt nodded, chewing with one side of his mouth so he could talk with the other, smiling the whole time. “That asshole Jeremiah tricked us pretty bad. I mean, he didn’t have to try very hard; most cities we’d seen with vampires had a nasty side to them. But with Dolareido, he told us a lot of horror stories, and we came here full intent on war, you know? If we’d known the Prince was so strict about how kine are handled in Dolareido, a lot more than just Dennis, Marge and me would have sided with Jack.” His smile faded for a while, but once he started chewing again, his smile came back, and he nodded to them all as he swallowed. Easiest way to a man’s heart, his stomach.

“Perhaps Dennis and Marge could visit the Circle?” Jen said, and she made sure to put a little sluttness in her voice. “Or you? We’re all quite friendly in the Circle, and comfortable with each other.” Leaning back, the Ventrue made a small gesture to Sam, and to Triss behind her.

Harcourt raised a brow, but when he saw the other vampires not exactly deny what Jen said, he coughed and choked on some more of his food, before managing to swallow it down.

“I don’t think Harcourt is gonna be seduced by a random offer for an orgy,” Clara said, narrowing her eyes at Jen.

“Oh? I heard y—”

Triss slapped Jen upside the back of the head, and Jen went quiet after a tiny squawk. Harcourt blinked, confused, and Clara breathed a hidden sigh of relief as she smiled up at Triss. Yeah, Jacob might have hated the werewolves, but Triss didn't, and just cause Clara had made a drunken mistake once or thrice with Jessy's ghouls didn't mean it was worth rubbing her face in it. Not that Harcourt would care, but Clara seemed worried anyway.

“Jen's lewdness aside,” Triss said, “it's probably best the hunters steer clear of the Circle. You are hunters, and the Circle don't always do... nice things, to kine.”

That earned a frown from the man. It didn't fit his personality at all.

“What?”

Triss put up her hands. “Don't worry about it. Nobody dying you'd care about. Check the obituaries if you don't believe me. And I'm guessing the hunters do that regularly anyway.”

“Missing persons reports, actually. But obituaries sometimes too.”

“Ooh.” Samantha's eyes went wide as she looked at Harcourt. “Do... do you hunters stand around as you put up pictures on walls, and draw webs connecting them? Or is that all digital now? Do you, um, stay up all night reading newspapers about old, mysterious deaths? Do you do stakeouts and stuff?”

Clara, Jen, and Triss all struggled to keep from laughing. There was no denying the kind of woman Samantha was. But thankfully for Samantha's sake, Brace was too dumb to pick up on it, and probably just figured she was an inquisitive soul.

“Uh, sorry. Don't wanna give away trade secrets.”

“Oh! Oh, right, sorry. It's just so fascinating! I've only been a vampire for half a year, not even, and all this cloak and dagger stuff is scary, and interesting!”

“It's scary, I'll give you that. Dolareido ain't like the other cities my friends and I have dealt with.” He sighed as he leaned back, shaking his head. “Kills me that I couldn't convince more of them to listen to me. But hunters don't usually cooperate, you know? Solo gigs, sometimes a pair. They didn't want to listen to me, didn't trust me.”

“They listened to Jeremiah though?” Triss asked.

“Someone like Jeremiah doesn't come along often. Dude had connections, magical tools, and the most insane force of will you've ever seen. He could have walked into a bar full of strangers, and had everyone in there following him into the pit of Hell thirty minutes later. And Angela, that psycho bitch

was scary as fuck, but at the same time, you knew she could get the job done. Whenever shit hit the fan, Angela always came out on top.”

Samantha sighed as she looked down.

Harcourt’s eyes went wide as he realized. “Oh shit, sorry.”

“It’s ok. That was... it was...” Sam clutched her necklace for a few quiet seconds before lifting her head. “Bad things happened. But Jeremiah and Angela are dead, and I got to talk to my daughter again. I still get to, sort of.”

Brace leaned in. “I heard about that. I... don’t want to overstep and tell you what you should do with your life. Or your second life, or whatnot. But, ghosts are dangerous, Samantha. Very dangerous.”

“Do you... know a lot about ghosts?”

He shook his head vehemently as he took another bite of his meal. “Not as much as some of the other hunters I’ve ran into. But I’ve dealt with a few ghosts in my time, and it’s always the same story. Given enough time, ghosts turn bad. I don’t know why, probably something to do with that they’re ghosts and don’t exactly think, just... do. But every ghost I’ve dealt with, I ran into because they started causing trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Killing people.”

“Oh.” Samantha looked down again.

“But hey, I don’t know if that’s gonna happen to Mary. Probably lots of ghosts out there we don’t know about because they don’t do things to attract attention.”

But they all knew the dude was speaking truth earlier. And the truth fucking sucked.

~~~~~

“I think you were making Clara jealous,” Sam said, “flirting with Harcourt like that.”

Jennifer chuckled as the three of them walked the streets, not in any real direction, just wandering. They were hungry too, and looking for a meal.

“You have to admit, Samantha, that Harcourt is a delicious looking man.”

“Yeah, but he’s dating Clara! Or, you know, kinda is.” Young relationship, far as they knew.

“Jen was doing it on purpose,” Triss said. “She knew it’d make Clara jealous.”

“What? Why? That’s mean.”

“She was doing it cause she’s hoping it’ll give Clara the nudge she needs to be more proactive. The girl hasn’t had the most successful romance life in Dolareido, so a kick to the ass might get her moving, get her out of her rut.”

“Ooooh. That’s smart.” Samantha nodded as she smiled, understanding clicking into place. “Still mean, though.”

“I am a surgeon with a scalpel,” Jen said, returning Samantha’s nod.

Triss laughed, shaking her head. “More like a butcher with a cleaver.”

“Either way, the meat gets cut, and progress is made. Now hopefully Clara will take the initiative and find a little happiness. And leave her interest in Jack behind before it gets her hurt. Or dead.”

“Dead?” Samantha asked.

“Of course. Jack and the Prince are an item, and if Clara ever pushes a little too hard, I can imagine your sire pushing her back. Off a thirty-story building.”

“Jesus,” Triss said. “I don’t think she’ll kill her. Unless…”

Samantha gasped again. “Unless!?” Damn, the Daeva was just too cute.

Laughing, Triss gave the woman a pat on the arm. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s go find ourselves some men to seduce and drain, and tomorrow night, I’ll try that ritual.” And hope to fuck it worked, and didn’t leave Samantha traumatized for it.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Natasha~~

“Jessy, J-Jack is—oh my god!” Natasha stared at her laptop, squeaked, and as realization set in, she groaned. “You said you’d be ok to talk!” Apparently, she should have given Jessy more than a five minute warning she was going to call.

Jessy and Eric were sitting on the couch, facing the laptop they had on the table in front of them. Kat the cat sat on the couch back, blissfully dozing the night away, while her owner and his lover had sex. The damn Gangrel was leaning back against Eric's chest while the man had his hands holding her hips, and she had her legs between his, almost close enough together to hide her bits. Almost, but not quite, and the angle showed that the two were having anal sex, while a lot... lot lot of white stuff trickled out of her sex.

Casual, lazy anal sex, judging from the complete lack of movement in the two.

"Sorry," Eric said as he peeked around Jessy's shoulder for the camera. "Her idea. We'd been relaxing, and then you texted her, and—"

"Th-This is how you relax!?" She leaned toward the laptop so she knew her angry face filled their camera.

Jessy shrugged and gestured to the cat only a foot away. "Kat understands."

"Kat is a cat!"

Laughing, Jessy leaned back against Eric's chest, let her head roll back onto his shoulder, and she slowly spread her legs until they nudged his apart. One of her hands drifted down to caress her very swollen clitoris, while the other teased and massaged her breasts. And the whole while, Eric kept his grip on her hips, and slowly pushed her back and forth.

Well, they were relaxing, that much was true. There'd be sweat if they'd been going at it rough, and there wasn't any. Which meant Natasha really was interrupting their lazy relaxing sex, which she also knew they both kinda deserved with all the shit everyone had been going through, them included.

"I'll call b-back."

"No! Come on, don't do that. You know I love it when you watch." Jessy leaned forward until she was literally leaning over the table, and she planted her hands against it as she smiled at Tash. Which of course made her big breasts hang underneath her, and Tash had to make a very strong effort to not look at them.

Natasha didn't have the same bisexual tendencies a lot of women in Dolareido had. Or at least, not as much. That didn't change that Jessy looked really, really good naked.

"Fine! F-Fine. Just... hurry up, ok?"

"Yeah alright. We've been kinda just grinding for a while now anyway."

~~♥♥♥~~

A moment later, Jessy was on her knees on the couch, a big towel beneath her knees, elbows on the couch arm, and she made sure to arch her back and stick her large ass out as she got comfortable. Eric got behind her on his knees too, lined his length up, took her hips again, and thrust and yanked at the same time, burying himself inside. Tash couldn't see the actual point of penetration, looking at their profile like she was, but the angle indicated anal again.

No matter how much she tried to not, Natasha couldn't help but watch Eric, his thick muscular arms, his defined abs, his hard ass, and his long cock, as he pounded Jessy's ass. Each thrust meant the woman's big butt hit his pelvis hard enough to have the whole thing rippling, and her big boobs jiggling under her. They also had her groaning as Eric picked up the pace.

Kat, right beside Eric from the camera's angle, didn't care in the slightest. She licked herself a few times, glanced at the laptop and Natasha, licked herself a few more, then settled on the couch back once again.

The boys weren't around. If they were, they'd probably say some stupid stuff like 'oh wow look at that' and maybe gesture to the way Jessy's body looked absolutely fantastic in that position, back arched down and ass up. They'd want Natasha to notice, and she would. But Natasha would notice Eric more, like she was now. An innocent treat! The boys didn't mind. And Jessy really liked it when Natasha watched. So did Natasha, much as she kept trying to convince herself otherwise.

Eric liked it too, evidently. He twisted his chest a little, making sure Natasha could see the muscles as he built up a sweat. Show off. He made some grunts and groans that were less natural, more practiced, more the kinda noises a guy made when he was trying to be pretty for the camera. They weren't bad, Tash even kinda liked their more controlled sound, and she doubted Eric noticed he was doing it. A natural actor?

Either way, Jessy certainly loved hamming it up for the camera, and Tash could see it helped her get off, but she wasn't a good actor. Awesome and attractive and full of passion, but a horrible actor. She just did whatever felt good, and whatever she thought made her look hotter.

Natasha gulped, and stared on as Jessy bounced back and forth on the couch until she came. But Tash's jaw utterly dropped when Eric pulled out of her, set his cock along her ass, and came as well, drenching her back in layer after layer of cum. Tash had seen this done to her from her own perspective, but it wasn't the same as seeing it from the outside.

Vampires had the Blush of Life to let them basically fake life, and since that was an ability fueled by vitae, they could push it if they wanted. It made sense why some vampires got addicted to sex, and basically spent all night every night having it, as long as they had some blood to fuel their Blush.



Werewolves didn't. Instead, the strange wolf thing living inside them drove their bodies to superhuman abilities, and that included regeneration. And that included, uh, all the juicy stuff.

By the time Eric was done, thick white lines flowed down Jessy's sides, down her ribs, and down to her teardrop breasts hanging underneath her, until they dripped onto the towel on the couch cushions. The cum flowed down her waist, and some flowed down her ass when Eric backed up a bit, and trickled down her thighs as he coated her. Wow, she looked like a painting.

~/♥♥♥~/

"D-Do... you always have anal sex?" she asked before she could stop herself.

Jessy, shivering as she recovered, eventually stood up and smiled down at the laptop. Having sex in the living room must have been common, cause she reached over, grabbed another giant fluffy towel, and cleaned herself off. She didn't bother hiding any of herself while she did it, of course.

"I like both," the Gangrel said, shrugging. "Eric likes both. Why?"

"I dunno, I just... I mean..."

"Well, unlike you, I don't have two guys to fill me up, so I can only do one hole at a time."

Tash groaned and buried her face in her hands. Trying to talk to Jessy about sex was a mistake, always leading to more ridiculous, crass comments. Horrible talk like that was fine in the middle of sex, when everyone's brains were all clouded with hormones and stuff, but it was vulgar when everything was done.

Or was that just Tash still being a prude? Well, she wasn't a prude, she knew that! Not with her sex life. But still, Jessy was a bit much sometimes.

Case in point, Jessy made sure to wipe Eric's length off with the towel, and made a show of it for the camera. And Eric, completely corrupted by Jessy's evil ways, didn't stop her or twist away or anything. If anything, he posed a little, and subtly flexed his abs and stuff, like posing for the camera before a fighting match.

But he laughed, quite aware of what Jessy was doing, and how silly it was, and eventually slipped on a pair of boxers as he sat down. Jessy tried to sit down next to him, but he blocked her.

"Get dressed."

"Ugh, fine." Jessy reached down and put on her underwear and her blouse, and sat down with Eric. The sight of Jessy cuddling, like full on romantic lovey dovey cuddling, was a strange sight, and

Natasha couldn't help but smile. Which earned a flip of the middle finger from the Gangrel at the camera. "What'd you say about Jack?"

"R-Right, Jack. Jack is... um... Jack doesn't know about Minerva's legacy yet, right?"

Eric winced. Jessy shrugged.

"Course he does. I messaged him. Dude needs to know."

Natasha sighed, leaned forward over her laptop, and rested her chin in a palm.

"He d-deserves to know, but it might have been better if he didn't, you know? At least not yet. The Prince doesn't w-want us to let Samantha know about Black Blood."

"You fucking serious?" Jessy snapped her eyes to Eric, but he put up his hands in quick surrender, and she groaned as she leaned back toward the camera. "Samantha is the nicest vamp in the whole fucking city, and we're just gonna let her keep dating that asshole Jacob?"

"The Prince thinks it's... complicated, and w-we shouldn't try and make Samantha do anything. And if we d-did, it might tip Black Blood off. We need to be stealthy."

"Jesus," Eric said.

"Fucking right, Jesus! Samantha's her childe! Jack's mom! Like... god damn it." Realization set in, Tash could see it on her friend's face, and Jessy leaned back on the couch and against Eric's shoulder as she accepted the cold truth of the situation. There was some logic to the Prince's choice, no matter how much they hated it. "Your boss is a cold bitch, Tash."

Natasha laughed. "So was Maria."

"Ha, true."

"W-What did you message Jack?"

"Just that Black Blood is doing whatever Minerva was doing in the past, and is probably gonna get us all killed."

Natasha frowned at her, and then Eric, who again put up his hands in surrender.

"She pays my salary, Tash. Plus, you know, the whole loving her thing."

Right, loving her, and thus telling her very secret stuff. A dangerous thing to do, but something Tash would have to seriously think about in the future when dealing with Matthew and Arturo. She couldn't break her trust with the Ordo, but there had to be a common ground she and the boys could walk on.

“Jack’s smart,” Jessy said. “He’ll talk to the Prince before he does anything.”

And that conversation might not go all that well. Tash had just recovered from a horrible situation with her boys, but what Antoinette was doing might even be worse. Sure it made sense, tactically, but emotionally she was being utterly brutal, leaving Samantha in her situation and ignorant of it besides. Jack might not take it too well, and with the curse thing making him a ticking time bomb, things could get very bad.

“I got a m-message,” Tash said. “From the boys. They said we should talk with Clara.”

“How much Clara know?” Jessy asked.

“M-More than Avery used to, since Jack told her about stuff.” Repaying Clara a favor, Jack told Natasha later. “But, after all that’s happened, I think Avery’s caught up. They were investigating the t... t-tears before Jack told her about the mysterious threat we’d been investigating. And after what happened with Eric, Sándor, me, and the boys in the Hisil? The Uratha p-probably know everything now.”

“How much is everything?”

“B-Black Blood is responsible for the t-tears, and that we’re terrified that it’s up to something. That it might t-tear down the walls between realms.” The communication software Tash and Jessy were using was secure, hopefully. “Clara knew, and now the boys know that the tears are happening in more places than just the Hisil. And it’s n-not like I could make the boys not tell Avery, not after everything we’ve found out.”

Jessy grimaced. “Shit. Sounds like we’re bedfellows with the wolves, whether we want to be or not.”

“But you’re busy w-with a war.”

“Fuuuuuck, don’t remind me.”

“We should go talk with them then,” Eric said. “Or at least talk with Clara, like Matt and Art suggested. She’s, uh, a little more understanding than Avery.”

“That was then,” Tash said, “this is n-now. A lot’s happened, and I bet she’ll be more willing to help us.”

Eric shook his head. “Maybe. Avery’s stubborn, and it wasn’t all that long ago a short vampire kid thoroughly kicked her ass.”

“Clara then?” Jessy asked. “I mean, back in the day, Jack could just go to anyone and have a chat you know? The monsters, the wolves, the covenants, whatever. Ain’t like that anymore.”

Sighing, Natasha nodded. “Clara then. I’ll t-tell the boys, and we can arrange a meeting. Matt and Art should have told Avery what we want to do, but... but if you think we should go through Clara...”

“Clara,” they said together.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Damien~~

“I don’t think she’s dead.”

Damien raised a brow as he met Gloria’s eyes. The two of them sat in his apartment, alone. Fiona had been there earlier, but when Gloria Jennings showed up, Damien thought it best the two vampires chat privately. And using her crazy Begotten powers, Fiona had gone into his closet, and literally disappeared.

Sometimes it was so easy to forget that Fiona, bright and fun and jovial and the only sunlight he could touch without immediately bursting into flames, was a monster of nightmares and darkness. An actual, literal, monster of fear.

Mental note: go on a hunt with her again sometime. She’d explained that Begotten like her could sort of feed by proxy, share in the hunt, and alleviate some of their chronic hunger issues. Something about vampires, and other paranormals, all being creatures of the Dark Mother. Azamel propaganda? Fiona had never actually spoken to any sort of Dark Mother entity, but that didn’t mean she didn’t exist.

Damien leaned back in his couch as he watched Gloria. She sat in the sofa chair, leaning forward with elbows on her knees, eyes set and determined. He didn’t need Auspex to see she wasn’t lying.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because, I can... feel her, I guess.”

“Feel her? Ah, the childe sire bond.”

“Yeah, exactly. I’d feel her if she died, right? I’ve heard sires talk about it, about how it feels when the childe dies, or when their sire did. They can feel it, literally. And I’m not feeling that.”

“I’ve never sired. I wouldn’t know.”

“What about when Lucas died?”

“I was preoccupied.” Collapsing on his knees in the pile of ashes that was his sire had been a scarring moment. Any emotion he felt then was a maelstrom, mixed, and unknowable except as agony.

“Well I have sired, and the moment Amanda opened her eyes from death, I felt it. It’s subtle, but... but it’s there, always tugging at me.” She shook her head, hard enough her short black hair bounced against the sides of her wide eyes. “I could be wrong, but I don’t think I am. That little tug in my... in my insides, it’s still there.”

Frowning, Damien nodded as he looked down, chin in his fingers. “Then we have a problem.”

“Problem? This is good news! I just have to find her!”

“You know there’s a issue. You wouldn’t have come to me if you thought there wasn’t. You would have gone to Michael.”

She winced at that, and looked down as well. “I... don’t trust Michael. He said Amanda’s dead, and when he announced it to the rest of us, he gave me a stern look.”

“You think he knows you’d realize she’s not?”

“I do.”

It was strange hearing Gloria talk flat and serious. The power of the sire childe connection, he supposed. It wasn’t as compelling as the parent child connection, but still, even a vampire could become quite protective of their childe, given the right circumstances.

“That is an interesting situation then. Michael is no fool. If he has hidden Amanda away, possibly staked and trapped in torpor, so he can use her as a catalyst for his war, then he must have realized there would be repercussions. He knew that you would suspect she lived. And he knew that, if and when this war ends, her being alive is a situation he would have to resolve.”

“Resolve? You mean—”

“If he was willing to kill her for this war, he would have by now. It would have been a simple affair for him to kill her when Garry’s distraction set the building on fire. The issue now, is what will Michael do when the war is over. Will he release Amanda? How will that go over with the Primogen?” Damien sighed as he fell back against his couch again, shoulders slumping as invisible lead weights attached to him. “So many unknowns.”

“You’re telling me! That’s why I came to you. After that look Michael gave me, I was afraid to tell anyone.”

“You told me, but not Jack?” No need to ask why not Jessy.

“I... I thought about it. But Jack’s not Jack anymore, right? I remember the first time I met Jack, the same night he was embraced. Just a kid, intimidated as all hell by everything Julias was bombarding him with that night. Jack is not that kid, anymore.”

That was all too true, but not necessarily for the reasons she thought.

“Jack is trustworthy, Gloria.”

“Jack the Ripper is not trustworthy.”

He winced. There went any hope that that name hadn’t spread to common usage.

“Jack is not the Ripper. That is a separate thing.”

“So I’ve heard! But I don’t know what that means or anything. All I know is sometimes Jack can get pretty crazy, and people die. I know he’s been a problem for... everyone! The werewolves, the Carthians, especially the hunters. I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t trust him, or you’re afraid of him? Given the things that have happened, I can understand the latter, not the former.”

“You trust the Ripper?”

“Jack. Is not. The Ripper. I can’t go into details. It’s highly personal. But understand Jack is doing everything in his power to be rid of the curse.” Damien’s own efforts to find details about the ritual used to seal the original curse in Susanna had proven fruitless time and time again, as expected. It’d been like looking for a needle in a haystack. “And he’s doing everything in his power to make sure this war doesn’t get anyone killed.”

“I have a hard time believing Jack will be delicate about this, or rescue anyone. That scene at the hospital was—”

“I was there, in person, Gloria. I saw how bad it got, to a degree you—” No, wait, no point in scaring her. Opposite of the point, actually. “I think you’d be surprised at how much good Jack has done, both with and without the curse. You should trust him. I do.”

She sighed as she leaned back as well, and looked around at his streamlined apartment of blacks, whites, and metals.

“You trust him with your life?”

“I do.”

“And with the life of others? My childe?”

“He’s one of the few people I would trust with those burdens.”

After another heavy sigh, she rubbed one of her arms as she looked down, resigned. “Alright. If you wanna tell him, I won’t stop you. But... what should I do in the meantime?”

“For now, do whatever Michael wants. And if he wants you to kill Carthians, maybe drag your feet on that a little.”

“Sure, I guess. But I mean, you don’t think some Carthians deserve to get dusted? Some of them are real fucking assholes, you know.”

And the Carthians probably felt the same way about the Invictus. This turf war was hilariously stupid, and according to world history, utterly inevitable.

“Do whatever you can to avoid permanent repercussions, Gloria. Jack and I will get this situation fixed, one way or another.”

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Jack~~

He glared down at his phone, and the message Jessy sent. It was dumb of her, to message something this sensitive, but then again it was unlikely Black Blood was reading their messages.

~Eric and Tash found out that BB is trying to do what Minerva was doing, back in the day. Which is apparently apocalyptic? The fuck do we do?~

After a few minutes to let his hands stop shaking, he texted back.

~We focus on ending this stupid war, so we can focus on BB later. For now, Tash can handle it.~

~Sure thing boss.~

Boss. Ugh. She’d heard Jessy call Julias that. The memory hit him like a punch in the gut, and now was definitely not the time for a trip down memory lane.

He showed up at the Elysium Tower, with a single text message for the Prince. ~We need to talk.~

Naturally, she told him to meet her in the meeting room on the top floor, her main office. He did. Immediately, the room took on an air he was all too familiar with, and one he wasn't expecting: business meeting. Daniel stood in the corner, which was Antoinette's way of saying this conversation was not going to be a personal one, and he had to be aware of that. She knew what he was here to talk about, and she wasn't going to let their relationship affect the conversation.

He mentally rolled up his sleeves. He loved her, but they both knew situations like this were going to happen, and they had to be mature enough, and trust each other enough, to know it wouldn't affect their relationship. Hopefully.

“Black Blood is trying to bring down the Gauntlet?” he asked.

Antoinette nodded. “Indeed. The Gauntlet, and perhaps other things, we are not sure. Natasha is investigating, as is the sheriff.”

Jack looked to Daniel, and the man, dressed in his usual trench coat, nodded as he adjusted his glasses. The Prince purposefully left out how Daniel was investigating, because she knew it was better if Jack didn't know. Just one of the many little quirks of their relationship, not being able to share all their secrets with each other. It hurt, but he knew it was the right call.

“And my mom?”

“Unaware.”

“And...”

“And will continue to be unaware.”

He frowned and took a step closer to her desk. Daniel took his hands out of his pockets. He didn't go for his sword or anything, but Jack could see the grip of his sword poking up from over his shoulder. Knowing the sheriff considered him dangerous, even with the love of his life, was fucking infuriating, and Jack squinted at the man as he fought to suppress the growing rage. Throw it into the fire, like Elaine taught you.

Once he was calm, he looked back to the Prince.

“I guess you already know how this conversation is going to go.”

She nodded, her eyes steady. “Oui.”



“I don’t want Mom dating Jacob, or even getting near the guy, if we know Black Blood is actually up to some pretty nasty stuff. My mom is in danger being that close to Jacob. But considering how powerful Jacob is, the only way my mom would actually be safe from him would be if you locked her up in the basement of the tower until this whole situation is resolved, if that ever happens.” Like Michael tried to do with Roland. “And, just because Black Blood is up to something horrible doesn’t mean Jacob knows about it or is helping the spirit. Plus, if we suddenly make Mom not see him anymore, we tip our hand about knowing what Black Blood is up to.”

Her smile grew. Not the loving, tender smile she usually shared with him. This was the smile of a pleased mastermind, glad someone she worked with was capable of thinking with the same sort of intelligence she was. Except thinking this way made him sick.

“Oui, that is how the conversation will go.”

Jack looked down as his fists shook. “You realize you’re asking me to let my mother continue dating a man who’s most likely involved in something so bad, it could get everyone in Dolareido killed?”

“Yes.”

“You know how difficult that is for me?”

She leaned forward and set her elbows on her big desk as she netted her fingers together. “She was your mother in your first life. She is my childe in this life.”

Vampires being vampires. Elaine told him Viktor sired Julias because he wanted a powerful tool. Samantha’s power hadn’t really shown itself yet, but that didn’t mean Antoinette wasn’t going to use her as a tool regardless.

That isn’t fair. Antoinette is just looking at all the options and picking the ones that make sense.

It’s still heartless. Mom’s not a tool, she’s a person, and she trusts her sire to take care of her until she’s capable of taking care of herself.

Antoinette hasn’t thrown her life away, calm down. It’s still perfectly reasonable that Jacob won’t hurt her or anything.

Bullshit. Jacob and Black Blood work together and know each other well. Way too damn well.

He sighed. That was the impression Jack had, but not some sort of fact. His mom wasn’t dating Black Blood. She was dating Jacob, another person, someone that could be reasoned with, and might not even be a part of what Black Blood was up to.

Worst of all, if they forced his mom to leave Jacob, it might tip Black Blood off.

“So I have to... just pretend that it’s ok if my mom keeps seeing the Circle, and Jacob?”

“Oui.”

Slowly, he unclenched his fists, and forced himself to look Antoinette in the eye.

“Is that why you let Mom get so close to Jacob? I mean, Jacob was flirting with her way back when, and I just knew the asshole was doing it to get under my skin, and yours. But now—”

“You do not understand Jacob as well as you think, Mister Terry.” Wow, she hadn’t called him that in a long time. “He is not some enemy I am scheming against, some villain to be destroyed as Lucas was. Through the centuries, Jacob has proven time and time again to have more depth to him than one could know from the masks he wears and façades he displays. If he has taken an interest in my childe”—her childe, not his mom—“it is because there is something to their relationship that creates a connection. And I would be loath to rip that from my old friend, because of our agendas.”

He watched her closely as she spoke, knowing full well he probably looked angrier and angrier as Antoinette told him only half the truth. Nothing fucking worse than a fucking half truth.

Heat boiled up through him again, setting off a fuse in his mouth. “I’m not in the Ordo. I don’t take orders from you. If I want to tell my mom about Black Blood, then—”

She raised the corner of her lips in a small sneer, and growled. “I am the Prince of this city, Mister Terry. The internal affairs of the covenants are their own business, but this is no such thing. This is business that affects my city in its entirety, and potentially beyond. You will obey me. Do I make myself clear?”

He glared at her, fists clenching again. The moment they did, Daniel shifted. A single inch, maybe a centimeter, but he did, as if ready to respond to something Jack might do.

Fuck them. He turned around, and left. And he made damn sure to not look back.

He knew the only reason the Prince wasn’t grabbing him right now and demanding he listen to her, and pay for the disrespect, was how much their relationship had grown. But right there, for a single stupid second, he didn’t give a shit.

~~~~~

The real name of the bar was Tanent's Bar. Kindred called it the Border Bar.

Jack sat the bar, Bruce at his side, both of them pretending to drink. When the bartender, a Carthian thrall, asked for what drink, Bruce waved a finger and uttered a few words with some eye contact, and the bartender left, convinced Jack and Bruce had ordered already. The joys of being a Ventrue.

This particular bar, riding the line between the Carthian and Invictus half of South Side, was a frequent haunt for Carthians and Invictus who liked to rub shoulders the way American football players did. You had to let off steam somehow, and fist fights were a way to do that. All in all, it was a very stupid place for any vampire to be, especially stupid now that the war had begun in earnest. No one was under any illusions anymore. One misstep meant a dead vampire.

But Michael told him to pay a visit, because Carthians were muscling and trying to turn the bar from its usual 'co-owned' state, to a Carthian bar.

Jack stared at the drink in his hand, fingers slowly tightening as he ran the conversation with Antoinette through his mind over and over and over again. His mom could die because of her. His mom was only alive because of her. She was still being cruel. She was also being smart.

The pendulum in his brain smashed against the two sides of his skull over and over, until the glass shattered in Jack's hand. The few kine in the bar stared at him, but the thrall bartender knew better. She wiped up the mess, and got him a new glass, making damn sure to not meet Jack's gaze.

Christ he hated how scared everyone was of him. Even Bruce avoided acknowledging Jack suddenly shattering a glass. God forbid someone anger the terrible Jack the Ripper. Fucking god. And—

~Master~ Mulder called from outside. ~Carthians approach.~

Jack groaned as his familiars announced the entrance of three Carthians. No, wait, five. No, wait... eight.

"You're fucking shitting me," Bruce whispered.

"Apparently not." Sighing, Jack turned to the side and faced the group.

Joe of course. He was young, bit over thirty years embraced, and despite how dumb he was, Garry kept putting him front and center. Maybe the dumbass was trustworthy. Or maybe he was better in a fight than they gave him credit for, and he just hadn't had the chance to show his stuff.

Steve was there, Debby and Bella too. Kathy was there, but she hung out in back, eying him like he was some nasty thing that should be killed with fire. He almost expected to see Tilly, but nope. Maybe Garry had told her to avoid him? After he let her go and sent her to Garry, hopefully that act of goodwill had meant something.

Steve, Debby, and Bella were all serious, proven threats, Ancilla that were plenty dangerous in a straight fight. Joe was more dangerous, because he was itching to show he was worth all the attention Garry gave him. It was always the stupid, eager ones you had to look out for to do something really disastrous in the immediate, like throw a molotov like a baseball at a target five feet away.

“Eight of you, really?” Jack said.

“Was supposed to be a couple of us,” Kathy said from the back, “but then I saw you.”

Bruce nodded, and adjusted his tie. “Suppose if it was just me, it’d be two Carthians here. One to get my attention, one to stab me in the back.”

God damn it Bruce. Jack wasn’t trying to goad them. At the same time, he didn’t want Bruce to know he was actively trying to prevent a fight at every possible turn. Michael wouldn’t like open defiance. Defiance had to be sneaky.

The kine in the bar didn’t need to be asked. They walked out the back door, each glancing over their shoulders as they did, half to make sure no one was going to shoot them in the back, half to see who the hell the small dude in the nice suit was. It was his first time in the bar.

“You think we’d stab you in the back?” Joe said, snarling with every word as he came in closer, pushing aside a couple chairs. At least he didn’t kick them aside like some drunk moron.

Steve and Bella came up on his sides, but a little behind. Either they were content to let him throw the first punch, and probably take the first hit in return, or they were afraid of Jack. Both, from the glances they threw his way.

The Ventrue part of him fucking loved the scared, quick peeks. And even with the necklace keeping his Beast and the Ripper quiet, Jack could tell they loved it too. But Jack didn’t. Jack felt fucking sick to his dry, withered vampire stomach seeing that shit.

“Look guys,” Jack said, sliding off his stool. “You know why I’m here. Michael guessed someone would show up tonight looking to cause trouble.”

Joe frowned at him. “The Border Bar is ours.” Either the man was too stupid to feel fear, or he hid it very well. Probably the former.

“You know it’s not,” Bruce said. “And we’re sick of giving inch after inch over to a bunch of—”

Jack held up a hand. Not in a quick ‘shut the fuck up’ gesture, but a slower ‘I got this’ gesture. Last thing he needed was to make the Invictus uncomfortable around him, like a lot of them already were. Bruce knew Julias, and it was only because of that friendship he was willing to work with Jack.

“Give it some time, and everything will go back to normal,” Jack said. “Our bosses are having a tiff, but there’s no need for us to swing for the fences every opportunity we can.”

Bella laughed, but it wasn’t sincere. A fake laugh, the kind you used when looking for a fight.

“You fucks think we killed Amanda. We didn’t, but we know you think we did. You really expect us to believe you’re a peacekeeper, Jack the Ripper?”

He winced and looked down for a moment. That name, that fucking name was going to follow him everywhere. Garry you asshole, he saved Tilly for a reason. The fuck is this about, then?

Or, this wasn’t Garry’s call. Joe’s call? Why the fuck would Steve and Bella listen to this asshole? Maybe Garry was pulling his punches, and they wanted to step up the game? No one had died, since potentially Amanda, and Jack wanted to keep it that way. Maybe the others didn’t.

God damn assholes.

The angry looks on their faces said plenty. They were here for a fight, and they were looking for more than just a brawl. Fine. Knowing Carthians, they were going to get physical, use their fists, maybe some knives, and—

All eight of them reached behind their waists, pulled out hidden pistols, and pointed them at him and Bruce. Oh shit.

Jack pushed Bruce out of the way, just in time to hear the gunfire. Eight pistols, dozens of bullets, all pointed at the two Ventrue. At least Bruce was down on the ground, and not getting shot as he scrambled for cover around the corner of the bar counter.

Jack however, was getting shot. A lot. He’d expected them to come at him with fists and knives largely cause, yeah they were Carthians, but also cause pistols made noise. A lot of noise. And while the Border Bar wasn’t in a crowded section of South Side, there were still people outside.

They really wanted him dead. Christ, if they succeeded, did they even realize what the Prince would do to them?

Lead slammed into him, a fucking lot of it. Caught off guard, and with the necklace on suppressing his Beast, the bullets cut into him without issue. Tiny balls of metal that pushed through his

suit and into his flesh, where Kindred blood put a stop to them a little too late. Jack collapsed back on his ass, only for Joe to come forward and aim at his head, pulling the trigger half a dozen times in a couple seconds.

Jack put up his hand, and summoned his vitae. Vampire blood poured through his limbs, turning his Kindred flesh into steel. Joe's bullets crashed into Jack's hand, and while Jack struggled to keep the flesh barrier between his head and the incoming bullets, a bit of vampire strength made it possible. Once Joe stopped firing, Jack yanked off his necklace, pocketed it, and stood up.

Every Carthian there stared at him, and their jaws dropped as blood seeped out of the hundred holes they put into his suit. Thick, dark, Kindred blood oozed out from the holes in his body, and snaked around his limbs, sealing skin and muscle and repairing bone. They still had magazines, but none of them bothered to reload as Jack glared at each one of them while he repaired his body and prepared for war.

"Think twice!" Bella said. "Do anything to break the Masquerade and you'll be in just as much shit as we will. Worse!"

Jack glared at the woman, then the door behind her. Still closed. People outside heard the gunfire, no doubt about that, and someone would be calling 911 by now. Invictus wouldn't be able to stop the cops from showing up here for long without it being suspicious. Which would be a huge problem if Jack needed to deal with these fuckers asap, but he didn't. All he needed to do was keep them from establishing some kinda flag of ownership. Even if they did stake a claim, it wasn't real, just posturing. But posturing would turn into a real claim with time, and that was something the Primogen could actually bring to the Prince as a legitimate claim for territory, and blah blah blah.

Necklace secure in his pocket, Jack had an easy time summoning and controlling his blood, and once he was sure he wouldn't be walking out of the bar with a bunch of holes punched into his flesh, he forced the blood to settle. It continued to pulse under his skin, and from the looks the Carthians were giving him, they could see it pulsing. Everything went quiet, except for the quiet clinks of flattened bullets falling out of his clothes.

"Just get out of here," he said. "Don't make me make you."

Joe laughed, that half psycho half scared kinda laugh. "The great and mighty Jack the Ripper thinks he can take us all on? You—"

Bruce popped over the corner of the counter, and shot once. The bullet went through Joe's skull, out the skull, and crashed into the pub wall.

Jack snapped his gaze back at Bruce, glaring hard enough Bruce didn't fire a second time.

"I... He was open."

The Carthians, ready to scatter and surround Jack, Bruce's bullet a perfect bell to signal the fight had started, managed to not jump around as Jack held up his hands, palms forward and empty.

"This is a fucking bar, on the border, and no one has claim on it. I'm not here to take it, just make sure you idiots don't think you can, ok? Take Joe and get out."

The Carthians looked at each other, obviously skeptical, but when Jack stepped back and gestured to the unconscious vampire, they relented. Frowning at him the whole time, they scooped Joe up, and gave him to Bella. She left first, hiding herself and the dumbass with her Cloak, while the others followed after her. Soon the bar was empty save for Jack and Bruce, and he breathed a useless sigh of relief.

Groaning, Jack turned around and looked up at his partner.

"Dude, what the fuck?"

"What? Michael told us to fight off any Carthians who try and take the bar."

He was tempted to throw Michael a few insults, but he couldn't trust Bruce. Much as he and Julias had been friends, Bruce was devoted to the Invictus, maybe a little too devoted.

"Michael wants this war a little too much, Bruce. Be careful throwing dynamite ok? Take it from someone who's been at the center of too many big moments. One wrong move and you piss off everyone, cause a chain reaction, and suddenly everyone's trying to kill each other, you included."

"Didn't you thoroughly dismantle an entire pack of werewolves?" Bruce put the pistol into his vest holster, hidden under his jacket. "Werewolves we were trying to get along with? Clara and Carter used to live in some luxurious suites, paid for by us before that incident, right?"

Jack winced with every sentence. "Yeah, I didn't handle that situation well. And that wasn't..." Bad idea to go around telling everyone the curse had a mind of its own, but Kindred understood what it meant to have the Beast tugging at their emotions. "It shouldn't have happened. My Beast got the better of me."

"And that curse made it possible."

Jack eyed the man. "What're you getting at?"

"Use the curse next time Carthians show up and—"

“I used the curse to be able to do this!” He gestured at his chest and sleeve, riddled with holes, and idly plucked a chunk of lead out of his palm. Flesh sealed quickly.

“You know what I mean. Go on the offensive.”

“Two problems with that. First: there are a million ways going on the offensive could backfire. You think I can just march into Carthian territory and go on a killing spree? Just cause this curse makes me strong doesn’t mean a well aimed molotov isn’t going to instantly kill me. And the more we poke the bear, the more desperate the Carthians are going to get.”

“If they break the Masquerade, the Prince intervenes.”

“They’ll find a way to do some crazy shit without crossing the line. They attacked Xnomina, remember.”

“Alright fine, you don’t want this war to get more heated than it has to. What’s the second problem?”

Jack looked the man in the eyes, dead on, unable to keep the frown off his face.

“I don’t like killing people who don’t deserve it.”

Bruce met his gaze, but not for long, eventually looking down as he stepped back.

“That right?”

“Yes, it is. I don’t want to kill the Carthians, and I don’t want them to kill me.”

“Not many vampires in this city have a kill count as high as you, Jack.”

Jack froze for a moment, but let it go as he did the math. No, Bruce wasn’t talking about that thing with Viktor and Tony, or Lucas. He meant all the shit that happened after, the hunters Jack killed with the help of the curse.

If the man only knew how big the number really was...

Jack’s phone buzzed. He checked it. A text message from Damien.

~Gloria is convinced her childe is alive. Sire childe connection. I’ve told her to stay quiet about it.~

Fucking yes! Not exactly a guarantee that she was alive, but still. Also, shit. Ok, good that Amanda was probably still alive. She was a nice girl and didn’t deserve death. But, that meant shit would get complicated. If Michael had her stashed away, it meant he was using her to trigger his war, but also that he wasn’t heartless enough to kill her. Assuming Jack was right... what a shitty moral gray



area for Michael to be in. If he'd just killed Amanda, then Jack would probably end up killing him, problem solved. If Garry's stupid distraction attack had accidentally killed her, then Jack could see himself easily being forced to kill Garry, and other Carthians besides. Again, problem solved, shit as it was. But this? The fuck was he supposed to do?

"We're done for now," Jack said. "If Carthians show up while we're gone, it won't mean anything. They came for the fight, not for the bar."

"The fight they didn't get. The fight Mister McDonald wanted."

"Doesn't matter. The Carthians know they can't push us out, and that's enough." Jack headed for the back door. "Let's get out of here before the police show up and give us trouble."

"You know you could easily wipe their memories."

Yeah, he could, with the curse's help. And anything he could do to avoid using the curse, the better.

~~~~~

After a change of clothes, Jack decided to do something he almost never did anymore. Take a walk.

He sighed as he walked the sidewalk, hundreds of kine passing by as they drifted from casino to casino, lounge to club. Drunk, high, happy, they didn't know a damn thing about what happened in Dolareido, about the vampires that used them as cattle, none of it. That was the way it was meant to be.

Michael and Garry were going to ruin it, if they didn't kill each other first. And then the Prince would get involved, and as ridiculously strong as Antoinette and the sheriff were, they preferred diplomacy over an iron fist for a reason. Sure, the Prince's views defaulted to diplomacy, but there was also the tiny problem that there were only three dragons in Dolareido, while the Carthians and Invictus had about a hundred vamps each, since the Prince lifted the ban on siring. If Antoinette went to war against those two, who the fuck knew what'd happen. If she helped one, the other would help her, and then might backstab her when all was said and done.

Sighing, Jack looked up and caught a glimpse of Mulder and Scully as they drifted from rooftop to rooftop. Much as he wanted to think about the turf war, his mind kept going back to his mom. Sure,

she was a lot happier now that she was with Jacob, but that'd backfire pretty fucking badly if Jacob turned out to be an enemy.

Ugh, it hurt how obvious it was in hindsight. Of course Black Blood was up to no good, the spirit — not actually a spirit — wasn't exactly an embodiment of good things. Then again, a 'good' spirit might try and do exactly what Black Blood was doing, if it meant it got to do more spirit things.

No fucking wonder Avery didn't like vampires getting into all the spirit stuff. Shit was weird and complicated.

And yeah, all that shit itched at him, but it wasn't really what was bothering him, not completely. It was Antoinette's cold eyes when she told him to leave his mother alone, and let her continue seeing Jacob. Calculating, tactical, smart, and ruthless. Sometimes it was easy to forget how old she was, even though she'd told him on dozens of occasions a part of why she loved him, was cause of how he was honest about his emotions, and easily wore them on his sleeve. Antoinette, on the other hand, wouldn't blink if she had to kill a child to save two more. The Trolley Dilemma was probably a joke to her.

He knew that. He knew that about her from day one. But never in a million years did he think her ruthlessness would be pointed at him, and at his mom. His mom! Everyone knew by now that sure, Jack and his mom had some similarities, but she wasn't Jack. People could take advantage of her, her niceness and naivety. Could and would. He just never expected it'd be the love of his life taking advantage of her.

He stopped. People stepped around him, and some had to shove aside other kine to keep from touching him. Didn't need to be a vampire to feel the power and rage coming off him as he thought about Jacob, his mom, Antoinette, and Black Blood. Fists clenched at his sides, he stared down at the street, at his shoes, and let the rage boil.

Don't let it boil. Throw it into the fire, like Elaine taught you.

Maybe he should talk to Elaine about it? Nah, she'd side with Antoinette. Anyone that was thinking clearly would. Well, his mom was his mom, and he couldn't think clearly about sacrificing her as a ploy to beat Black Blood at whatever he was trying to pull. Hell, he couldn't think clearly knowing his mom was having sex with Jacob.

Sex. Jacob. Ugh!

He laughed. Christ, he needed a laugh. Of course reality came running back and hit him in the face, hard. Now was usually when he'd go back to the Elysium Tower and be with Antoinette, talk about science and music, have sex, maybe feed. And he didn't want to. He didn't want to look at her,

not now. Christ, if those Carthians at the bar had pushed just a little bit harder, he would have happily torn off some limbs.

~Clara is following you.~

Jack blinked, and looked up. Scully's voice. She perched on a power line, Mulder beside her, and both crows flapped their wings a couple times before looking across the street.

Sure enough, there was Clara. They met eyes, and she managed a small smile and wave.

~Know how long she's been following me?~

~Since those vampires fired all those guns at you.~

Scully and Mulder's vocabulary grew every night. It was almost scary.

~She probably heard the commotion and investigated.~

~Yes master.~ Mulder said. ~Clara is... nicer, than the white-haired one, master.~

He rolled his eyes, chuckling. Yeah, of course they'd have something to say about his love life, considering how often they were with him.

Sighing, he walked across the street and joined Clara. He was in his usual Invictus business suit, and she wore a white tank top and blue jeans. They could not have looked more different.

"Hey," she said. "Got shot?"

"Hey." He smiled at her. "A lot, actually. You didn't see it?"

"Nah. Can smell it on you. Showed up cause the police showed up. Saw you leaving, but didn't get a good look. Figured you were done for the night when you went back to your apartment, but I—"

"Followed me anyway."

"Well, yeah, you're kind of important. Sorry not sorry. Avery wants me keeping an eye on this turf war, and we both know shit's going to happen around you."

He laughed. "Yeah. Just... shit on my mind. Came back out for a walk."

"Yeah? Dolareido's a horrible place for walks." Naturally, someone bumped into her shoulder the moment she said it. People flowed down the wide sidewalks, and while they did a good job avoiding Jack these days, most people didn't have that luxury. "Why do you still have an apartment anyway?"

"In case I get shot up, and need a nearby source of clothes. Rich Side ain't exactly close."

"Touché."

“I’m surprised you’re out alone, and not with the pack, doing Uratha things.”

“We’re laying low. I—how much do you know? Tash been talking to you?”

“Yeah.” He grimaced as he looked down. “Well, Jessy has, cause Eric talks to her.”

“Course he does.” Laughing, a bit awkward and a bit sad, Clara eventually shrugged. “You gonna do something?”

“About Mom?”

“Yeah.”

“Apparently I’m not.”

“Uh, you’re not?”

He shook his head. “Can’t. Might tip Black Blood off. Antoinette—let’s go talk somewhere, not out here.” Much as streets crowds were usually a safe place to chat, he didn’t feel comfortable talking about Black Blood in the open. Deadly secrets of the Danse, no problem. But not Black Blood.

“Yeah, sure.”

~~~~~

“I’m not sure which is worse,” she said, gesturing around at his apartment, “the crazy mansion that looks like some rich old pervert stuck in the eighteenth century lives there, or this apartment.”

“American Psycho?”

“Exactly.”

He laughed as he plopped down on his couch. “Yeah, heard that before. Lot of Invictus vamps get these kinda apartments.”

“Any reason?”

“Easy to clean, easy to manage, I guess.”

“Easy to wipe down and clean blood off the floor, you mean.”

He laughed again, and she smiled as she sat down on the couch across from him.

“You know, all you gotta do is ask, and you can have your old apartment back. It was a luxury suite, Clara. Nicer than this place.”

She smiled for him, a pity smile. “Yeah, maybe. But after what happened with Maria and you, Avery’s happier avoiding Invictus attachments.”

“It’s not an attachment, it’s an apartment.”

“It was a bribe, Jack.”

He shrugged. “So? It was a bribe so you guys would play friendly. And it’s not like you’ve joined Garry and are hammering on us like he is, so it’s still in the cards.”

“Yeah, I guess. And I do miss the hot tub.”

“Hot tubs are pretty awesome.”

She grinned at him. “You’re avoiding the topic.”

“Of course I’m avoiding the topic! Last thing I want to talk about is Black Blood, and Jacob and my mom, and the fact I’ve been told to just... let my mom keep dating him.”

“That is a pretty shit thing to be told.”

“You’re telling me.”

“And you’re gonna listen to the Prince?”

He leaned forward, set his elbows on his knees, and let his head dangle. “I guess.”

“The fuck? Why?”

“Because she’s damn smart, Clara. If I confront Mom about this, it’ll tip Black Blood off. If I try and be sneaky, and just randomly decide I don’t want her dating Jacob, that’ll lead to a fuckload of drama.”

“Drama, from Samantha?”

“She’s my mom. I mean yeah, she’s super nice, and she definitely tries to go with the flow wherever she is, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t a person. We’ve fought before.”

“Hard to imagine her yelling.”

If only she knew. Even someone like his mom could scream and rage, if her husband died and her son closed himself off to her.

“She likes Jacob. And for some reason, I guess Jacob likes her. I—”

“Ha, for some reason?” She leaned forward, and met his eyes with a little more seriousness than he was expecting. “You’re with a vampire just as old as Jacob, you know.”

He broke first, looking down again. “Yeah apparently, but that’s biting me in the ass now.”

“Because she’s an ancient monolith? Makes super cold, brutal decisions easily?”

“Yeap. Nailed it.”

“You had to know that when you started dating her.”

“Yeah, but I never expected to be on the receiving end of that coldness, you know? Figured it’d always be me standing beside her as she, and eventually we, made those grand decisions. And hell, I’m good at that, I’m good at making heavy decisions.”

“But…”

“But not when it’s my mom!” He jumped up, almost hit the glass table between them, and paced around. Marched around really, considering he stomped his feet. “Christ, she’s always been naive and stupid.”

“Hey, that’s mean.”

“Well it’s true! She’s not smart, and I’m not going to sugarcoat that. She’s not built for this fucking vampire world, the Danse Macabre, and seeing her get manipulated by Jacob—”

“You said yourself Jacob seems to actually like her.”

Fuck. Jack stopped pacing and glared down at Clara.

“I really have a hard time believing that.”

“Hey, like I said, you bagged an ancient elder vamp with the biggest tits in the world.”

“Hey! Not… not the biggest.”

“And you know Jacob’s been doing witch stuff for centuries. It wouldn’t surprise me if he’s given himself a huge dick.”

“Oh god.”

“With like, bumps and ridges and stuff that feel great going in and out.”

“Please stop.”

“And it probably vibrates.”

Jack covered his ears and shook his head. “I’m not listening. Not listening.”

Clara burst out laughing, and for some damn reason, he did too, and he sat back down as they both laughed, belly bursting sorta laughter.

“All I’m saying is, give your mom some credit. If you’re interesting enough to bag a bitch like Antoinette, your mom can do the same to Jacob.”

“Yeah well, it’s biting us both in the ass now, I guess. Antoinette’s telling me to do something I really don’t want to do, and Mom’s dating a dude who could be trying to destroy everything.” It was a shit deal, either way. And it fucking sucked he couldn’t go to Antoinette and talk to her about this, cause he knew what she’d say.

Clara though, he wasn’t sure what she’d say.

“I guess it is, yeah. She’s half a millenium old. You’re, what, twenty-three, including your vamp years?”

He collapsed back against the couch, looked up and let his head rest against it. “I know, I know.” Ask her? It was dumb. It didn’t matter what Clara said, he knew what he had to do: not tell his mom. But, he wanted to know what she thought anyway. “You think I should tell her?”

“Ah fuck, I was worried you’d ask.”

“I know you got an opinion on it. And I’m all ears.”

She groaned as she leaned back too, folded her arms across her chest, and did the contemplation frown. He expected an instant reply, but she was really thinking about this. Which probably meant she’d agree with Antoinette, considering how perfectly logical the Prince’s plan was.

“I say you tell Samantha.” Or not.

“What, seriously?”

“Yeah seriously.”

“But it’s not a smart move.”

Clara groaned, got up, and sat down beside him. “Ok, maybe I’m sounding like a bitch for saying this, but fuck the Prince.”

“I mean—”

“Fuck the Prince, fuck the Danse Macabre, fuck all the stupid manipulation and deception shit. Samantha’s your mom, and family is important. And I don’t mean blood.” She set a hand on his knee,

but pulled it away a moment later. “I’m saying, if you really think your mom is in danger, do something.”

He stared at her, jaw dropping. “What?”

“I’m saying if you go through life, or your second life or whatever, only making the most tactically sound decisions, you’re going to grow into a cruel, heartless bastard. Sometimes making mistakes is what makes life worth living, right? I mean, christ, look at romance. How many of the best romances came out of bad decisions?”

“I’m... not sure—”

“How many friendships came out of really bad, stupid decisions?”

Jack winced and looked down. Damien. He let Damien live after killing Lucas. Hell, Daniel and Natasha had let him live, a massive risk, and they did it because they had a gut feeling he didn’t deserve to die. Antoinette would have killed Damien, if those two hadn’t asked for his sanctuary.

“I’m still not sure—”

“How many times have perfectly valid, tactical, calculated plans gone to hell, and the only thing that managed to save the day, or salvage something out of the fucking mess, was when people went with their heart?”

“Their heart.” He laughed at that, but it was a weak laugh, killed by Clara’s lack of one. “This really is werewolf versus vampire viewpoint, isn’t it?”

“I guess, yeah. What I’m trying to say is, it makes sense to make plans, but truth of the matter is, it’s impossible to know every detail about a situation, right? Shit always hits the fan in some way or another. If you’re an engineer and you’re building a machine, do the calculations. When you’re dealing with people though, there’s just so much chaos to it, so much emotion, so much unpredictability. Jacob and Antoinette are ancient, so I’m sure they’re better at predicting people than most, but I don’t care if they’re ten thousand years old, they’ll never be able to predict shit perfectly. But instinct, intuition, and good old fashioned heart has pulled me and my pack out of Hell dozens of times.

“We’ve dealt with vampires, maybe not as old as Jacob or Antoinette, but we’ve dealt with vamps who had money and people, agents, thralls, and big plans. That shit fell apart the moment bullets started flying. We’ve dealt with spirits crazy strong before, not Black Blood strong but still, and even their plans fell apart the moment things went head to head. And when people are struggling to stay afloat, and all you can see is smoke, it’s... it’s not the fucking plans that save people or make things happen.



It's going with your fucking guts, and doing everything you can to help the people close to you, your important people. Your pack."

Jack let her words sink in, before he gave her knee a small nudge with his own. "Trust my guts and my heart?" Which didn't even work anymore, vampire body and all that. "Like an anime? Next you're gonna tell me 'don't believe in yourself, believe in me who believes in you.'"

"Jesus, you are such a nerd."

He snorted on a laugh. "You're the one quoting an anime speech."

"I was actually going for more of a hero vibe, maybe World War II. Like, we're about to get overrun by bad guys, and all of our plans have failed, and now all we can do is fight for our lives, back to back, shoulder to shoulder."

"That does sound pretty epic."

"It's how Uratha do things. We plan the hunt, but when teeth meets flesh, we go with our instincts. Life just has too many variables to plan for everything perfectly. And our instincts pretty much always tell us to help our friends and family, no matter what."

He nodded, letting his eyes drift down as he tried to digest that view. Antoinette might have agreed with the idea that a plan couldn't be perfect, but she'd never agree with doing anything based on gut instinct, or a feeling.

"I... I wonder," he said, "if I get as old as Antoinette, I'll get..."

"Heartless?"

"She's not heartless. She's... It's... Her heart is buried, I guess, under a shit load of rubble and ice. A big part of our relationship is me digging it up for her."

Clara frowned at him. "A one-sided relationship."

"It can be, a little. Normally it's great. Different, but great, and... just..."

"Just not now."

"No. Not now."

Nodding, she leaned back as well, mirroring him. "You got yourself in real deep shit, dating an elder, especially one as old as her."

"It's not shit, it's... ok yeah, it's kinda shit, at least right now. I don't want my mom to die in one of the Prince's plots." And Antoinette did plots. She set up a nasty plot to get her earlier childe and a

brewing enemy to fight each other, and it worked beautifully. And he knew she'd made dozens of plots, to get Dolareido to where it was today. She hadn't said the words, but she'd implied more than few times that the Invictus and Carthians had danced to her tune before, as she molded Dolareido into her city.

"Well, I won't tell her. I'll respect whatever you decide. But, yeah, if I was you, I'd tell her. Who knows, she might surprise you."

The idea of going behind Antoinette's back made him sick to his stomach. The idea of Antoinette sacrificing his mom for a chance at outsmarting Black Blood, made him boil with rage.

He forced the rage down as he looked at the woman beside him. "You and Brace getting along?"

She sat up straight, and blushed. That was surprising. Clara may not have been completely desensitized to embarrassment like a lot of vamps were, but she was still harder than the typical girl, social situations included.

"Yeah, we are."

"That's good. He's not what you'd expect from a hunter, is he?"

"Nope. He's a complete doofus." She chuckled at that, shaking her head. "Not really, but you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do. And... and it's a good thing you two are getting along."

"Why's that?"

"Cause... cause I'm pissed at Antoinette right now. Royally, really fucking pissed at her. Holy fuck I never knew I could be this angry with someone I love. And if you were single, I might just do something really fucking stupid. That wouldn't be fair to Antoinette, and it wouldn't be fair to you." And it was really stupid to say out loud too, and he regretted it the moment he did. Much as Jack had gotten a lot better at socializing in the past few years of being a vampire, he still occasionally did dumb shit like say too much. Might as well puke his mental guts all over her lap.

But she didn't frown or wince, despite how over-the-top dramatic what he'd said was. If anything, she smiled more, and looked down at his glass table.

"Good thing, then. Brace is a nice guy. And strange as he is, we get along, really well. Plus there's the whole thing with his sister, which I can relate with."

Ok, good, awkward moment gone, thank god.

“Triss says the same thing. It’s surprising that he’s a hunter.”

“Yeah.”

He managed another small smile as Clara fiddled with her fingers.

“I’m... glad you’re not scared of me, Clara.”

“Scared?”

“A lot of people are scared of me. Terrified of me. They think I’m a time bomb or something about to go off any second. And I kinda am, I guess. After what happened at Maria’s place with you and Avery and... I’m glad we can still talk, you know? Christ, I’m so sorry. This fucking curse is ruining everything, and—”

Clara leaned over, and kissed him.

He froze, blinking at the beautiful woman. It wasn’t a quick kiss, the sort she might do if she was saying goodbye to the idea of the two of them ever getting together. It was a full blown, proper kiss, and she half closed her eyes as she leaned into him.

He didn’t push her away.