

~~Natasha~~

In the end, she couldn't ask Matt and Art to listen to her. When push came to shove, when rubber hit the road, she was so swept up in the moment that she was reduced to a whimpering set of legs and a river of juices in minutes. But she was going to give herself an A for effort anyway.

She smiled to herself as she washed Matt's body in the tub. Maybe next time? In the meantime, maybe she could try doing a little more... gate opening? Their gates of course, not hers. Hers could come later.

She smiled down at Matt's back. Art was standing beside them looking into the mirror, shaving, while Matt and her were still in the tub. Bathing together had come naturally, a byproduct of the fact both of her boyfriends were werewolves, and had voracious sexual appetites that manifested biologically. They came buckets. Which, in the moment, during the sex, was so terribly arousing that it melted her into a puddle. After sex, it was a giant pain, sticky and gross and ick and ew! So, bath.

Such a huge back on the gentle giant. So. Utterly. Huge. She couldn't wrap her arms around Matt if his arms were in the embrace, too big. Or, she was too small. Either way, it was quickly becoming a sight she was growing fond of. She rubbed soap along it, and licked her lips at the shape of his muscles, broad, hard, and how they fought against the pressure of the soap.

Wait, you're supposed to be gate opening. Stop admiring his broad shoulders. Less sexual stuff, more romantic stuff.

"You t-two should tell me more about... how you met," she said.

Art shrugged, tapped his blade in the sink — he shaved with a knife, eesh — and resumed shaving. "Avery's pack had just arrived in Tijuana. Stephanie was with them, and she knew the place a bit." Right, Stephanie, the one who died. "I had just suffered my first change... some people died. It was on the news. I was on the news. I went into hiding, and Avery tracked me down."

"We found him pretty beat up. I'd only been part of the group for a short while, and eager to prove myself." Matt turned around in the tub for her, and she began washing his chest. As much as Matt and Arturo were big burly guys, she was thankful they didn't have too too much body hair. Plenty, but not enough to seem like they were wearing sweaters. Still, she'd prefer they trim some of their pubic hair off, as was fashionable in the city. Maybe she could ask them later?

"So of course Lenny starts a fight with me the moment he finds me."

Matt chuckled. Mmm, such a warm noise, from so close.

“Hey, you threw the first punch, Art.”

“You grabbed me by both shoulders. From behind!”

“I was trying to catch you. You Irraka are sneaky fuckers.”

“Pretty sure the grab was followed by a tackle.”

And back and forth they went, earning some giggles from Natasha as she listened to the two boys argue. Each had their way about it, an approach, a style. Arturo Ibarra had some grit to him, a touch of anger, a touch of the bad boy, but mostly a playful sort. Matthew Wilson was the gentle giant, and she could tell he didn't have Art's wit or grit; words and insults rolled off his back like water though. It was easy to see why they got along. Art was rough, in a way. And Matt was soft, in a way.

“W-What about b-b-before you became werewolves? What was life like? Or... or um, d-don't tell me, if you don't want to.” She offered her best apologetic shrug at Matt, and continued to wash his body. Hard to focus on the questions, when rubbing down his enormous chest and abs and arms. She could fit into the grooves of him, between his arms and legs, and just disappear, if she wanted. No! Bad Tash. Focus.

“It's a touchy question,” Matt said, “at least for some Uratha. Leaving behind the old life isn't always easy, you know? I... I guess you would know all too well.” The giant turned his head to the side, exposing his neck to her a bit, and he looked at her with the corner of his eye. Quizzical, curious, expressions she didn't normally see on his face. But, it faded a few seconds later, and he smiled his usual smile. “I lost my family when I was very young, well before I became Uratha.”

“Oh...”

“Don't worry, I was young, it's a faded memory. I lived far up North, and sometimes the conditions can get you killed, that far up.”

“Far up North? You d-don't sound like... you're from Europe. Oh, Canada?” Must have been living in Nunavut or Labrador.

“Mmhmm. Eh.”

Heh, her gentle giant was a stereotype.

“Do you... s-say sorry a lot?”

Arturo laughed, hard enough he had to put the knife down. “He does, because he keeps knocking shit over, a regular klutz.”

Matt rolled his eyes, reached out, and picked Natasha up. She squeaked, squealed, and squirmed, as the huge man pulled her, wrapped her legs around his waist, and set her down so her butt pressed against his pelvis. He wasn't aroused since they'd just had sex, but she knew what these werewolves were like, and if she didn't get control of the situation, they'd be doing things to her in two minutes.

The gentle giant smiled down at her. The water of the tub reached their waists, hot, tingling. She wasn't blushing life anymore, but from the look on his face, she knew what he was going to ask. Or maybe ask her when he was done kissing her, because he leaned in, and set his lips to hers.

Arg, it was just so damn easy to simply let go, stop fighting, and let them — or in this case, him — take control. She sank into his waist, his shaft underneath her butt and getting harder by the second, as his kiss grew more and more passionate. His eyes were open a sliver, enough so she could see the joy in them, as his hands held her tiny body. Soon he was leaning over her, and she pressed against his chest to try and get him to stop. He didn't stop.

“Matt!” Art said.

“What!?” Matt sat up straight, and dropped her.

Water overwhelmed her, and she disappeared beneath the surface, frowning up at Matt the whole time. The water wasn't too hot, so she had no issues looking up through the waves at the man, who had ‘sorry’ written across his face in big, bold letters. He scooped her up again, and guided some hair off her face so it was dangling behind her.

“Sorry,” he said, as if his puppy dog face wasn't apologetic enough.

She snorted, laughter breaking through her frown, and pulled on his neck to start kissing him again. Which, of course, caused the shaft underneath her to start getting harder again, and harder, until it was just like it was an hour ago, with the man ready for more sex.

Art was watching them now, standing beside the tub and rolling his eyes. “Matt, I was going to say, give the girl a break. But... I think we got time for a quickie.”

Oh no. She tried to re-summon her frown, but Art set his hand on her hair, combing it along her scalp with his fingers, before he gently turned her head to face him. And, once he sat himself down on the tub edge, one leg in the tub, he began to masturbate. A few seconds was all it took for his shaft to grow to full length, and aim straight at her. And, as he smiled his devil smile at her, he pulled her head in toward his cock.

... ok, maybe a quickie.

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If she was human, she'd be sore. Sex, sex, and more sex. Two boyfriends made it hard enough to go five minutes without one of them trying to get into her pants, but the fact both of them were werewolves, and more or less in a constant of ready to fuck, made it impossible. And, the fact that when they got their hands on her, they were rather... aggressive, about getting what they wanted, made it more impossible than impossible! And the fact that, every time they took hold of her, her whole body was set on fire, and she had to blush life and give in before it killed her, made it triple impossible.

But for now, they were done, and Art and Matt and she were out on the streets, walking toward Avery's base near the Carthian district.

"You sure you want to come with us on this hunt?" Matt said. "Claimed can be dangerous."

"I d-don't understand what claimed are. So, I... need information." Information made the world go round. It made Antoinette happy. It made Natasha happy too. If there were things like urged or claimed in the city, she needed to know what those things were. "And, you're my b-boyfriends! I should hang out w-w-with my boyfriends." And she liked saying the word. Boyfriends.

Art leaned in beside her, walking beside her, devil grin on his face. "Want to hold hands?"

"... no. I'm t-too small. I'd look like... your daughter, or something." Hand holding could come later, when they were alone.

Matt laughed, and turned to walk backward for a few moments while looking at them. "We know Dolareido is a strange city. But a lot of that strangeness, you Kindred don't really understand, right?" He slowed down for a moment until he was beside her, opposite of Art, and he started walking in line with them as he leaned in, reigning his voice in. "The balance between Dolareido and the Shadow world is an odd balance, sitting on a knife's edge."

"B-But I... d-don't know what means." And honestly, it wasn't her primary or secondary goal at the moment. Still, it was terribly intriguing, knowing her boyfriends could interact with this Shadow world at any time, when Antoinette and Tash had to work so damn hard just to get peeks at it.

"Maybe we'll show you sometime?" Matt said.

Art shook his head. "Avery would kill us. And more than that, it's not safe."

Natasha frowned up at Art. The three of them were walking the sidewalks closer to the Carthian district, which meant there weren't many people on the sidewalks, at least not nearly as many as the Invictus half of South Side. It gave them the room to walk side by side, and for Tash to try and shove Art. Alas, too light, and she succeeded only in pushing herself into Matt.

"I'm older than either of y-y-you! D-Don't underestimate me. I... would love to see it someday." Terrifying as that idea was. It also wasn't one of her goals, but the idea of crossing to the other side, of seeing this strange world she'd only poked at, of seeing more things like Safe or that strange spirit of secrets, it was all so interesting.

And that was one of the primary goals of the Ordo Dracul, to gain knowledge. Invictus wanted power, money, and structure. Lancea et Sanctum wanted history documented and religious tenants satisfied. Carthians wanted... well, borderline anarchy. The Circle of the Crone wanted to push their dark agendas, of instigating a predator and prey world filled. The Ordo Dracul wanted knowledge, all knowledge, especially about things that could be of use to a Kindred trying to learn more about themselves, about the nature of being a vampire.

At least, that was what Antoinette and Daniel taught her, and she bought into it, believed it. And now she was strong enough, old enough, to pursue it.

"Honestly," Art said, "I'm surprised you haven't been there already. Avery says Antoinette and Jacob have both been poking at the Gauntlet for centuries."

"Yeah, b-but all we can do is poke."

Matt nodded, sighing a little as he looked up, leaned back, and scratched his head through his shoulder-length dirty blond hair. "Honestly, I think we should take you. Dolareido's a great city, a nice place, all things considered. You vamps are a part of that, you made that. You should see what sort of effect it has on the side of the veil."

She perked up, blinking at him. She didn't realize their actions could affect the other side directly.

But Art shook his head. "You know if we ask Avery, she's going to say no."

The gentle giant shrugged, and set his hand on Natasha's further shoulder, so he could pull her in a bit into a sort of half hug while they walked.

"What she doesn't know can't hurt her."

"The fuck? Of course it can."

"Tash will be fine."

“She might be fine, but she’ll definitely be at risk.”

“It’s her choice.”

“Yeah but curiosity killed the cat.”

“She’s been doing fine so far.”

“We almost killed her when we met her.”

It was weird listening to the two boys argue, because Art was being the cautious one, and Matt was being the adventurous one. Normally it was the other way around, and she changed from frown to smile and back again as she listened to them argue about her. Eventually, enough was enough, and she elbowed Art in the side.

“I can t-take care of myself, especially if you’re both there to protect me. I really... want t-to see...” See the place Safe came from.

“Arg, don’t give me those eyes,” Art said, covering his eyes with a hand.

“What eyes?” she said.

“The eyes! The cute, adorable eyes.”

“I...” Who was she kidding? She was tiny, she could pull off adorable eyes if she tried. When Art looked at her again, she put her forearms to her chest, hands in small fists against her collar bone, and gave him her best begging ‘help me please I’m so frail’ eyes.

The man groaned again, as if she’d shot him. She had, sort of, with cuteness.

“Fine, fine! If she dies, I’m blaming you.”

Both she and Matt chuckled. She was going to get to see the Shadow world. It wasn’t going to be an imaginary thing in her mind anymore, it was going to be solid and real and something she could touch and see and smell.

But, focus. Primary goal was to deal with the hunters.

“Hey guys,” she said. “You... you um... you t-talk to Avery yet? About the hunters?”

Both werewolves visibly cringed. “We did,” they said in unison.

“... she d-doesn’t want to help, does she?”

“It’s not like that,” Matt said, “but after what happened last time she was here, she says she’s not jumping headfirst into anything.”

“... I see.” Weight pulled her head down, and she let it hang in front of her a little as they walked. Maybe Jack could convince her? If anyone could, it was him, but considering all the baggage around the whole previous incident, with Avery and Jacob and Antoinette, there was a good chance Avery might be hands off. At least, until the hunters decided to hit the Uratha too. Would they do that? Of course not, not if their goal was the Begotten and any Kindred giving them refuge. Fighting a war on multiple fronts was never a good idea.

“On that point,” Art said, “Avery can go fuck herself. You need help with a hunter, Tash, just ask.”

Uh oh. She blinked up at the man, eyes growing wide again. “You’ll... get in trouble.”

“She’s our pack leader, not our mom.” The Irraka shrugged, like it made sense. “Do your bosses punish you if you’re insubordinate?”

“Yes!” She squeaked, looking around after making the noise. “Y-Yes, they do. Violently, s-sometimes... a lot of the times.”

Matt laughed. Maybe he didn’t understand, or take her seriously. But, his eyes changed after a few moments. “I... suppose yeah, they probably would, wouldn’t they? I remember what some of the vamps did to their childe and whatnot, in Tijuana. Nasty. The church dudes were particularly brutal.” But he shrugged, and hugged her in a little tighter. “Avery might yell at us, maybe smack us around a little, but nothing like what you vamps might do to each other.”

Natasha leaned into Matt’s side, and shuddered a little at the memories. Strange, it was memories of Viktor being a colossal tyrant toward his servants, that made Tash appreciate Maria a little more.

“You’ll help t-too?” she said to the gentle giant.

“Not as excited to go against Avery as Art is, apparently, but yeah, I’ll help.”

Once they arrived at a corner, now bordering on Carthian territory, Art and Matt each came to a stop, and both sat on a nearby bench. Not sure why they wanted to stop here, but Natasha shrugged, and stood beside the lamppost, leaning against it.

“Jack will probably tell Avery more details,” Art said, “but you can fill us in too.”

“O-Ok.” She’d told them about the hunters before, but not details, not yet. Wasn’t sure it was her place to maybe cause issues, getting the Uratha involved when Antoinette hadn’t asked her to. Still, Kindred had to be proactive, they had to actively hunt down ways to solve their issues. It was true that

action was not inherently superior to inaction, but that was rarely the case when Kindred were typically on the receiving end of antagonism.

“So, um.” Where to begin, where to begin. “W-We know the hunters came for Azamel.”

“The Begotten?” Matt shuddered, and rubbed his arms, kind of like Natasha did when she was disturbed by something. It was cute on him. “No one in the pack has so much as talked to her yet.”

“Exactly,” she said. “That’s p-p-part of the reason that... that we haven’t talked to the Uratha yet about this. The hunters are... they’re here f-for the Begotten. Kindred are in their way. But you guys, you’re um... not really involved. And, w-we don’t want to... make more enemies.” If they asked the werewolves to help, and some of the werewolves died dealing with the hunters, that was asking for a problem.

“You know much about the Meninna?” Art said. “Us, the Hunters in Darkness.”

“N-No.”

“We told you before the Meninna don’t like roaming. We want a place to live, to stay, to protect. Avery came back here cause she thought she could do some good, to a place that kind of got royally fucked last time she was here, so she says.”

Matt raised a hand. “And David told us the spirits were talking about this place.”

“Yeah, that too.” Art shrugged, and gestured around them. “And hell, we’d prefer to be living out in the wilderness, or maybe some quaint little village. We’re here because we think we can do some good, or at least Avery does. And, honestly? Like we said, Dolareido is a pretty good setup, and we’d like to help keep it that way.”

Natasha tilted her head to the side. That all sounded great. Then... “Then w-why are you all so concerned about... stepping on eggshells?”

“Because you outnumber us thirty to one.” Art sighed, leaned forward, and let his forearms rest on his knees, hands hanging between them. “We’re on orders to be on our best behavior, because we’d like to stay.”

“... you’re afraid... of us?”

Matt laughed, as if what she said was silly. “This is the only vamp city I know of, with six elders, who aren’t trying to kill each other. If you guys decided to work together, and use those silver swords of yours, yeah, we’d be fucked.”



She meeped, and moved her hand down to her hip. “You... y-you noticed, huh?” It wasn’t like the sword was out and dangling. She had it hidden inside her suit jacket, above the hip.

“We’re not blind,” Art said. “We’ve seen you take off your clothes. Hell we’ve stripped you many times.”

Yeah, she was being delusional if she thought they wouldn’t notice the new sword. “...true.”

“And hey, we understand. It’s a weird situation for everyone involved. We didn’t know Begotten would be here, we’ve never really dealt with them before. We’re trying to be nice, and we almost got that Fiona girl killed.”

And there was that. Instead of Fiona dying, Stephanie died, and despite that, the Uratha were still playing nice, albeit very passively.

The more she learned, the more she felt the Uratha would be the perfect allies for Kindred in Dolareido. Maybe Jack would learn the same thing, and he could find some way to smooth out these issues? Ugh, it was horrible politics. Jacob had every reason to hate Avery, and Antoinette certainly didn’t trust them, both vampires unhappy with the Minerva situation. And the wolves had a relationship with the Carthians already, which meant there was stress with the Invictus. Jack had his work cut out for him.

But maybe she could do a little work too.

“If... if you help, w-with the hunters, I... I c-can only imagine that... everyone in Dolareido w-would appreciate that. All the covenants, and even the... B-B-Begotten.”

“Unless we get someone killed in the process,” Art said. “We don’t play nice, Tash.”

“I know!” She fucking knew. Running from them, through the tunnels, and the way they literally tore through walls of concrete, and ripped apart an old subway train like a paper bag, was not a memory she was ever going to forget. “I-I know, b-b-b-but... we’ve already lost someone, and almost lost another.”

Matt sighed, slouching back in the bench, opposite of Art’s forward leaning. “Yeah, it’d have really sucked if that Jack kid died. Dude really pulled through, jumping in there with the Azlu.”

“Ha, yeah, now Clara’s got a crush on him.” Art laughed, and brushed back some of his dark hair out of his eyes. “I really hope she doesn’t do something stupid and piss off your Prince.”

“That... is... is that something she m-might do?”

Art shook his head. “No... probably not? Shit I don’t know. She’s Cahalith. They’re always a bit emotional, and have a habit of letting those emotions make them do stupid shit.”

“It’ll b-be kind of funny if... a strange love triangle brought the whole city down, r...right?” she said.

The two men looked at each other, then back to her, before they broke into laughter. “Yes, it would,” they said together. Was it something they’d seen before? A scary thought, romance destroying cities.

“So, um... w-what are we going t-t-to do now?” she said.

“Two choices.” Art counted them off, pulling down on a finger with each option. “Matt and I were going to investigate some reports that sound like Urged or Claimed, but nothing serious, nothing we can’t wait on. So instead, we can start showing you the world we live in, the Hisil, what spirits are, and where they live. Or, we can help you get a lead on finding these hunters.”

“I vote option B,” Matt said. “The former isn’t your problem, the latter is. And I’d really hate to see you get hurt in the Shadow world, just cause I offered. Worse, I’d hate to see you die to hunters here, in the physical world. Kind of gotten attached to you.”

“... thank you,” she said, smiling and walking in closer. There wasn’t any room on the bench for her, so she sat down on their knees, where their two knees were beside each other. A kiss for Matt, leaning back to give him one. And a kiss for Art too. Nice, big, proper kisses.

A kine walking by raised a brow, a woman, tattoos and dreadlocks. When Tash met her eyes, the woman mouthed ‘nice’, and kept walking.

It was nice.

“I... I hope Avery d-d-doesn’t... get too upset.”

Matt put a kiss on her neck, and winked at her. “We can handle her.”

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The three of them took a taxi to the old prison, or near it, at least. They didn’t anyone know where they were going after all. The taxi driver offered her a few curious glances through the rear view mirror when both men got familiar with her, touching her legs, stroking her cheek or neck, each putting a kiss

on her head. And of course, she got flustered and tried to stop them, including some elbows in their sides. But, she couldn't stop giggling, which earned more touches from her boys, which earned more glances and raised brows from the driver.

Once the driver let them out, and she managed to get her laughter under control, the two of them made the five minute walk toward the old prison. She felt safe with them around. What hunter would be crazy enough to try and take on two werewolves and the red riding hood vampire they were with?

But she wasn't a moron. She kept an eye open, peeked around corners, looked buildings up and down, used her auspex to scan for nearby threats. It wouldn't be able to separate a hunter out from the people walking by, the other kine, but it was better than nothing.

A smooth walk to the old prison. No issues, no hiccups. The Invictus had already cleaned everything up, cleared out any evidence of the incident, and removed any police presence. The front door of the complex was locked, the outdoor gate, but that was easy to deal with.

They jumped over it. Natasha was light, and with a little vampire strength, she launched herself ten feet into the air. Grip managed to catch the top ridge of the gate, and she flipped over it with no issue. Art and Matt both looked at each other, and started clapping, quiet little claps, like they were suddenly rich snobs applauding an appealing performance. Jerks.

The other two couldn't jump so easily; they had to make running jumps, throwing their weight into the pillars of the gate and running up it before forcing themselves upward, and managing the tip of their grip on the pillar top. The pillars were small, with only enough room for one hand, but each beast was able to pull themselves up with the one hand.

Damn that was impressive, for a living creature.

"Not much security," Art said.

She shrugged, and gestured to the main door ahead of them. "It won't even b-be locked. There's n... n-nothing going on here, nothing to steal or anything, so—" A hand on her shoulder brought her to a halt, and she looked up and over at Matt behind her.

"... something happened here."

"Y-Yeah, Jack was—"

"No, I mean... something horrible happened here."

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~~Jack~~

Heading back to Avery's apartment, except this time he had Damien and Jessy with him. They took a drive, one the larger Invictus cars, one that let the three of them sit in the back. Naturally, Jack and Damien both took a window seat, and Jessy sat in the middle.

"Hey Damien," Jessy said, "where's that Fiona girl been lately?"

"I have not seen much of her. I believe she is in hiding with her fellow monsters," he said.  
"Why?"

"Thought you two might have been dating or something, and you being you, Mekhet and all, were conveniently refusing to share with me juicy details."

"... and why would you think that?"

"She expressed interest, didn't she? I remember what she was like at the ball." Jessy elbowed the poor man in the side, complete with a nudge nudge wink wink. "She likes you. Apparently she's got a thing for dark, brooding types."

"She is what, nineteen years old? Perhaps twenty?" He sighed, and looked back out the window.  
"I am over fifty years her senior."

"Not the same, and you know it." She wrapped an arm around his neck and shoulder, and pulled him in toward her to face her. Well, face her breasts really, with the way she yanked his head in for a casual headlock. "If you don't move fast, Eric will take her."

"Eric? Ah, yes, the new bouncer at Bloodlust." Poor guy squirmed some, but he wasn't getting out of Jessy's bro hug. "He is welcome to her, if he is as—"

"No no, god damn it Damien, you jackass. Fight for the feisty redhead." Jessy reached out, and yanked in Jack's head as well, so she had the two of them in headlocks. "Jack here was what, twenty, when he was embraced? And not long after that, he was in the Prince's bed. And she's got a lot of years on you, Damien, so I don't think the 'she's younger than me' defense really applies."

No doubt Jessy was trying to cover up her own sexual adventures, and how the woman only ever slept with kine, all much younger than her. But it was true, so Jack smirked at her, and managed a shrug, despite the headlock.

“Think we can focus on the job?” Damien pulled away again, and Jessy let him go. But, not before a hint of a smile hit the man’s lips. Enough for Jessy to laugh and wink at Jack.

“It’s all on Jack,” she said. “Nothing we can do. You got a plan anyway, Jack? Wanna fill us in?”

He almost started with the crows. Jessy and Damien both knew he worked with crows, but he didn’t want them knowing everything he was doing. Not because he didn’t trust them, but because it was the safer way in managing a secret; the less people who knew the better. His two pets were watching them from above, and with some practice, the two birds would be his eyes in the sky from now on, permanently.

He was going to take this new position of his seriously. Right hand of the Invictus, with the paltry amount of experience he had? He could already picture the scenarios, some older Invictus questioning him, prodding him, testing him to see if he actually deserved his position. And when the cards were all laid out on the table, Jack would come out on top. Diligence and preparation.

It wasn’t the only reason he acquired his two new pets, but, he wasn’t so stupid to not see the eventuality coming a mile away.

“The plan is to convince Avery to help us.”

“Yeah, duh, I get that.” She let him go, but not without a shove. “I mean, details. How are you going to convince her to help us?”

“Two things. Julias gave us various things we can offer as incentive. But, I can already tell Avery won’t take that bait, not wholly. She’s like Garry, and has no issue living in a rundown apartment building, with cockroaches for neighbors. And she’ll want to do hunts without our interference or help anyway. No, we if want to make friends with someone like Avery, we have to offer her something more than open borders.”

“And that is?” the two of them said.

“Peace of mind.”

Jessy raised a brow. “I’m not following.”

“She’s a leader now. She wasn’t before. The last time she was here, her pack leader Simon got into it with the vamps here, right? But he’s gone, and now the shit show he stirred is on her. I get the impression if Simon wasn’t her leader, things with Jacob and Minerva would have gone differently. The backlash of that is on her, and she wants to fix that.” The memory of Jacob and him running into Clara

and Avery in the street was a powerful one. Poor Clara, down in one punch from the Nosferatu. Not even a punch, just a backhand slap.

Both Damien and Jessy shuddered when he said Jacob.

“Y-Yeah,” she said, “good luck with that.”

Jack sighed. He knew what they were going to say. “You don’t think I can change his mind, do you?”

“Not a chance.”

Damien nodded agreement.

But, Jack wasn’t going to be dissuaded. “Look, I know Jacob’s old, very very old, and I know elders are pretty set in their ways.”

The Gangrel shook her head. “No, that’s not it. Jacob’s psychotic, Jack. You’ll be trying to argue with a crazy person, and I doubt you’ll make much headway.”

“I might be able to. Beatrice works for him, so does Jen, and I’m friends with Triss and... Jen, sort of? Not really but she likes me well enough. I think I can makes some headway that way.” As he spoke, he noticed Damien fidget when he said Triss’s name. A finger twitch, nothing that should have caught his attention, but Damien looked down at the same time. Weird.

“Alright, sure sure, but what are you going to tell Avery? What’s the game plan for actually convincing her your efforts to make everyone sing kum ba yah will work?”

“I’m going to make some promises I may or may not be able to keep.”

Jessy facepalmed.

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Damien and Jessy stayed outside, in the hallway. Avery didn’t want them in the room with him, and honestly, he was kind of happy they weren’t with him either. Tense, having more Kindred around, when Avery was already annoyed at the prospect of having these meetings. It was her idea, but he could tell she’d only thought it up as a lesser of evils.

Clara was there, and she smiled as she met his eyes. She was leaning against a wall, and looking outside the window at the streets below, peeking into Garry’s territory. No doubt the man kept a vamp

or two around, scouting, hiding, keeping an eye on things. Could Uratha smell vampires? Vampires had a far more mild odor compared to their living counterparts.

Matt and Art weren't there, likely hanging out with Natasha, or doing... werewolfy things, whatever that was. But, there were others.

Mason was a werewolf he knew about only indirectly. Apparently he'd become acquainted with a Carthian named Tilly; very acquainted, based on the sounds he heard walking through the hallways. He'd never heard a woman scream out like that, like it was porn, over the top and ridiculous, but considering the bed squeaking that came with it, he could only imagine it was genuine. It was a wonder the floor didn't collapse. But at least he couldn't hear it inside Avery's apartment. Much.

Avery sat on the couch with two other Uratha, and he offered each of them a small wave. She was so small compared to her pack. Gave small guys like him hope for the future.

On her right was David, tall with short blond hair, the man who never looked at anyone straight. Fidgeting, and rocking slightly in his spot. Parkinson's? Doubtful. These werewolves seemed like they healed from anything. A woman named Monica sat on her left, a black woman with super short air, buzzed almost, and it looked pretty awesome with its naturally kinky curls. She was a fair bit taller than Avery too, almost as tall as Jessy.

They were all dressed in jeans or similar, with raggedy old t-shirts and tank tops and such. Now that he was used to wearing suits all the time, he had to admit, he didn't miss the old clothes he wore. Invictus rubbing off on him, probably, and Julias specifically. Something about a well-tailored, expensive suit, was satisfying to wear. Even now he wore a simple single-breasted dark gray suit, a white shirt underneath, and a solid black tie. It made him feel... powerful.

Yeah, that was definitely Julias rubbing off on him.

"Avery," he said.

"Hey Jack. We haven't talked since you got all fucked up." She leaned back in the couch, and nodded her head Monica's way. "Monica's Irraka, she got me some nice info about the fallout from that."

Jack sat down in a chair, a half-broken wood thing that made him smirk when it teetered underneath him. "Yeah, fucked up is a pretty good way of describing it. They... tortured me. Suddenly all those war movies I watched before I was embraced have more gravitas."

Clara frowned, and looked out the window again.

“Shit like that can put life into a new perspective, yeah. Lot of us have been there, in some way or another.” Avery nodded, and offered him a small smirk. “But you didn’t come here to talk about you. You came here to talk about the hunters.”

“It was the hunters who tortured me.”

“You know what I mean. You want us to help.”

“I understand that you’re hesitant to do that.”

“Wouldn’t you be? I came to the city because some spirits pointed us in this direction, talked of an Azlu, and also about some spirits ready to cause problems. We’ve dealt with the Azlu, one of them, but one of them lived. And the issue with the spirits isn’t dealt with; we haven’t even put a dent into that mystery. You’ll note the word ‘hunter’ has yet to be mentioned.”

“Yeah but, don’t you want to stay here?” He leaned forward, elbows to his knees. “Dolareido was a pretty peaceful place just a couple years ago, Viktor and Tony asshat-ary aside. Everything’s been flipped upside down since...” Since he became Kindred. “And I’d love to get back the old city. You guys could help make that a reality, and stick around to enjoy it.”

“The hunters are here for the Begotten, Jack.” She raised a hand and wiped it aside through the air. “And from what I’ve gathered, there are a lot of them. If we get involved, it’s going to be messy. Your precious, fragile Masquerade could come crumbling down.”

“My sire tells me werewolves have a strange thing about them, something that makes viewers suffer a sort of madness, lunacy, if they witness werewolves performing... werewolfy acts.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but it’ll only help to a point. You think if a fight breaks out in the middle of the fucking city, that widespread lunacy won’t attract attention? You think you got hunters now, wait till shit like that becomes a media sensation.”

He sighed, rubbed his buzzed hair, and looked over at Clara. Still looking out the window, but still frowning. Maybe she didn’t like Avery’s choice? He looked back to Monica and David, but their expressions were impossible to read. David looked like he wasn’t in the room, like he was outside and looking at clouds. Monica was expressionless.

“The Invictus are offering you open borders,” he said. “I don’t think it’ll be enough to convince you, but it’s a start.”

“Open borders?”



“Like you already have with Garry, I assume. Come and go through our territory as you like, and if you need help with something, a place to live or some equipment, we can give it.”

“... thanks.” She brought her fingers up to her chin, and held it, eyes down a bit and digesting. If that offer managed to sway her a little, maybe there was a chance for this to work out. “I actually think a couple of my pack would like to stay in some place a bit more glamorous. All-expenses paid deluxe suite sort of deal?”

“Um, yeah, sure, in all likelihood. Can’t promise the White House, but we can get you pretty close.”

“Perfect. Clara and Carter have been hoping to try living the rich life for a while. You can understand, Uratha don’t get to do that often.”

He nodded, and smiled. Yeah, Uratha weren’t immortal, they died of old age eventually. They hadn’t amassed fortunes like the Kindred had, the Invictus in particular. Maybe a taste of money would encourage them to try and protect what the Kindred of Dolareido had managed to build here, and were willing to share. Some.

“I’ll make sure they get some luxury apartments then. I’ve been looking for a new one myself.”

“Right, your promotion.” Avery laughed, and hand gestured again, to the dingy, stained, white door of the apartment, where Damien and Jessy stood just beyond. “Your buddies and you must make bank.”

“One of the perks of being Invictus.”

“Really pisses Garry off that you Invictus swim in money, you know.”

He put up his hands. Bad topic, bad topic. “Invictus and Carthian issues are uh... not really my domain.”

Again she laughed. “I know.” Before he could respond, she leaned in, set her elbows on her knees like him, and met his gaze, a few feet away. “But that offer is not enough reason for me to risk the lives of my pack, for a problem that’s not ours.”

No, of course it wouldn’t be. He couldn’t blame her, much as a bird-eye’s view of the situation told him the werewolves helping with the hunters made perfect sense. When it was your own people, you didn’t throw them into the meat grinder without assurances.

“... I’ve been thinking,” he said, “about that night Jacob and I were walking home, and you and Clara were there.”

“Yeah, what a lovely night,” Clara said. “I’d really love to repay that fucker too. Nice candlelit dinner, and a claw down his throat, ripping off his jaw. See him sleep that off?”

He could sleep that off, Jack knew it. If Viktor could come back from losing a chunk of his head, in a matter of minutes, Jacob could survive more.

Avery shrugged. “What about it?”

“I think I can talk to Jacob.”

“And do what?”

“Get him to talk to you.”

“... the man is as old as dirt, one of the most powerful vampires on the planet, and I killed the woman who was basically the love of his life, Jack.”

“Minerva.”

“Exactly.”

“Jacob still wants to know exactly what Minerva was doing that warranted the incident.”

No good. She shook her head, and dismissed him with a wave of the hand. “We’re not telling anyone.”

“Not even wha—”

“Not even what kind of thing she was doing. I’m not an idiot, Jack. I’m not going to give info that can be extrapolated. And I suggest you don’t go digging. I also suggest you don’t bring this up with Jacob, because the man is not going to change his mind.” Sighing, she tilted her head from side to side, earning some loud cracks. “But I appreciate that you’re trying to help me out. You probably think I’m unwilling to help about the hunter issue without bargaining, don’t you?”

Ah shit. That was a very true, very callous way to word it.

“Invictus habit,” he said. “And, you said—”

“I said I’m not going to throw my family into harm’s way without a good reason. You vamps may think that means I need to be convinced. It really means I need time, get familiar with the city again, get a feel for its situation, on both sides of the Gauntlet. And get a feel for you vamps.”

Ok, if she wanted a feel for the situation, he could help with that. “Invictus are worried about your relationship with Garry, as well. The situation is a little tense between us and the Carthians lately, and if push comes to shove, it’d be bad for us if we found you on their side.”

She raised a brow, and looked over at Clara, who shrugged at her. Laughing, Avery shook her head again, and smiled at him. “Christ, you vamps are ridiculous. You think because Garry and I get along that I’ll ever, ever let it affect my decisions with shit like that? Your political games are idiotic and self destructive.”

“I... don’t disagree that they can be pretty stupid.” The Danse Macabre was a painful lesson to learn, but it was the way of things. At a certain point, it was time to accept that vampires were immortal creatures, loners by nature, and forced to share resources; the environment bred deceit and manipulation. “But like you said, you’re friends with Garry. If we showed up at his door one day, with intent to kill him, you’re saying you wouldn’t get involved?”

“If it ever got to that point, I’d have to be more than buds with Garry to risk my family in a full-on war.” She got up, and stepped around behind the couch. Pacing. He understood pacing well, a way to let the mind function more smoothly. Never once in his life did he manage to talk on the phone, without getting up and pacing around. “So calm the fuck down. I’m not going to go to war with the Invictus unless you guys do something that would deserve us slaughtering you.” Confidence dripping out of her pores, she ran her fingers back through her black hair, before pulling the long ponytail around her waist to hold it in front of her. Reminded him of Antoinette, and how she liked to play with her hair when she was thinking. “... you’ll still talk to Jacob though, right?”

There it was. He smiled back at her, a subtle one, one that spared her some face, instead of calling her out on it. “Yeah. Apparently peacemaker is my new role here in Dolareido, and... well, I’m down for that. Gonna talk to Garry too at some point. But...”

“But?”

“It’ll be hard to convince Jacob to do anything, if you’re not going to spill the beans about Minerva.”

“... you understand what werewolves do, right?”

“You... kill spirits. And other things, from... that other place.” Learning anything about what the Uratha did was tough. The witches and dragons both kept their secrets about their mystical pursuits, like the Invictus and Carthians kept their secrets about their tactical decisions. But with the Uratha, it was like trying to piece together a mystery, using the evidence left at the scene of the crime. It wasn’t that the Uratha were actively hiding what they did, they just didn’t bother to share the details, and the Kindred were hopeless to piece together anything from the aftermath.

It must have drove Jacob and Antoinette both insane.

“We prevent the two worlds from fucking each other up. Mostly, the Shadow world wants to get its claws into this one, and most spirits do all they can to worm their way over here, and spread their influence... you know what? I’ll show you.”

“Um... what?” Uh oh.

“I’m not going to take you into the Hisil, relax. I am going to show you the sort of shit that happens on this side of the wall, though.”

“Uh, um... sure, but uh, what about Damien and Jessy?”

“They can wait here. We’ll keep an eye on you.”

“I’m not sure that—”

“Either they wait here, or I don’t show you shit. Your choice.”

“And the Prim—”

“You can talk to your Primogen about this; it’s nothing they don’t already know, if only a little. But, you’ll probably want to keep this to yourself, Jack. I’m giving you a peek of what’s out there, what’s in this city you’re ignorant of, and your elders are barely aware of.”

He sighed, looked down at the scuffed and dented floor, rubbed his head back and forth, and juggled words on his tongue. He needed to get Avery on his side, as per his Invictus orders, and get her to commit to helping with the hunters. He also needed to be an information exchange point with the Primogen. But, if this information let him make better decisions in pursuit of any of those things, then...

Do it. Get the information, figure out what to do with it later.

“Alright.”

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Damien and Jessy weren’t too happy about the arrangement. He wasn’t either. But, no risk no gain, supposedly. He wasn’t a fan of that philosophy, and would argue that risk was a great way to get yourself fucked; he knew Antoinette would agree. But, Avery liked him, far as he could tell, and she wanted to throw him a bone.

For the love of god, don’t make a dog pun out loud.

Clara and Avery were with him, leader and second-in-command. She had a lot of faith in her pack to be able to monitor and guide themselves, keep themselves in check and under the radar while she was gone, considering the circumstances they were in. But then, she was also willing to split some of them up, and let two of them live in the Invictus territory. Almost sounded like a student exchange program, considering he was currently neck deep in werewolf business, and soon Clara and Carter would be neck deep in the Invictus half of South Side. Hopefully they knew that meant they'd be monitored even more than they were now.

The three of them headed to Devil's Corner. Jack left his jacket and tie at their apartment, not wanting to attract the attention of muggers. It'd really suck for the muggers, to try and jump him and the two women with him. Would the Uratha kill kine that easily? It was better for everyone if they didn't, and besides, the less eyes on him the better. His mother and sister were still alive out there, living their own lives, and one fuck up had already nearly broken the Masquerade.

They stopped in front of a hotel. Except, not really a hotel. A brothel, sort of. Restless Nights was one of the few places in Dolareido that sold sexual services, that had worked out a deal with the Invictus to avoid legal ramifications. Far as he knew, it was a pretty sweet deal for everyone involved. The kine who sold their bodies were kept in good health, provided with health care and such, and the management staff weren't abusive pimps. And those doing the fucking also got to pick their clients; but considering it was commission work, and everyone in Devil's Corner was poor, he was sure they usually said yes.

Course, no one knew about all these details, the broken laws and the hidden dirt, except for the higher ups and the Invictus. And, of course, Vicky and Parker, the two Invictus who ran the joint.

"You ever been here?" Avery said.

"M-Me? No, course not."

Laughing, she took them around back into a dark alley, and around behind the building. "It has a very low turnover rate, so I've learned. Turns out, the whores who work here, actually like working here."

"... maybe it's because of the benefits? Parker and Vicky keep it in good shape." They kept other joints in good condition as well. At this point, knowing that Kindred were running brothels in 2018 was almost quaint.

"Maybe. But that's not everything." Avery knocked on the back door, no doorknob. It was the sort of back door you expected to find on the back of a suspicious building, the ones that hid their contents

inside their basements, making meth or selling children. The latter, definitely not in Dolareido, but the former, probably lots.

Someone opened the door, a portly woman, big cheeks and frizzy black hair. “Hello? We don’t have any appointments with—”

“Take us to the room,” Avery said.

“W-What?”

Ah, the stutter, the classic sign of someone being both surprised, and finding themselves in need of hiding a secret.

Jack waved a hand. “I’m Jack Terry.”

“Oh... oh! Right, the Master Terry.” The woman nodded, and backed away to let them into the building. “Didn’t know the Invictus were making a visit. Madam Goldman and Mister White aren’t here, but—”

“No no, it’s fine. This isn’t about them, or anything like that.” He nodded a little as he and the two werewolves stepped in, and he leaned forward to look around. Vicky Goldman, Parker White, neither were here, so he could take a peek. A couple of offices, and around the corner, a small hall leading to the front desk. An old, rundown building, like it belonged in the Carthian district, but Devil’s Corner was harsher, meaner, dirtier, than the Carthians like. No money to be had for the Invictus, and no loyalty to be had for the Carthians. But, there’s always money in sex. Maybe not a lot, considering the locale, but there was some.

“Right this way, Master Terry. The room, right. I’m surprised you know about it. Five of our girls and one of our boys is down there now. Looking to meet someone? Of course you’re not, not with that Prince as your arm candy. Good lord, you’re so small, I have to wonder what that’s like. Sorry, never been to any of the meetings myself, I—”

Jack raised a brow as the woman prattled on, and on, and on. A thrall, and one Jack could tell her sire kept out of the loop. But she knew who he was, and knew he was dating the Prince, so, either she knew at least a little, or he was famous enough for all the thralls to be talking about him. And, he had to admit, that kinda stroked his ego a bit.

Instead of taking them into the lobby, she took them into the other office. Old, half-rotting wood, white walls dented or stained, desks with piles of papers on them. A computer with a CRT monitor running Windows Vista. Good god. He looked back at Avery and Clara, and laughed, louder than he

meant to, at how the two of them looked around at the place like someone might when entering a lovely wood cottage for the first time. They probably thought the place was homely.

The thrall opened a door, and started down the stairway. The smell of weed and other drugs wafted up into the air. He expected old wooden stairs, damp and scratched concrete walls, and exposed wiring, maybe a dehumidifier sitting on the floor, trying to keep the place from collapsing into a swamp. But, the room greeted him with white walls, cleaner than the ones upstairs, and as they descended, high ceilings showed dangling bits of... beads? Dark beads, hanging like curtains, hundreds of them, ends connected to the ceiling of polished metal grating, so they came within inches of touching the floor with curving lines.

The sound of moans filled his ears before he could spot the source.

He looked down. The stairs weren't wood, but soft carpet, thick shaggy carpet, maroon and clean. When they got to the floor, the same sort of carpet greeted them; wait, there was a door mat with a bunch of shoes on it, before the door. They should have taken off their shoes. He reached down, but the thrall laughed and shook her head.

"Don't worry about it Master Terry. You and your friends can do whatever you like of course. We'll clean up any dirt, don't you worry none."

"Thanks."

"Can you leave us alone?" Avery said.

"... um, if that's what the little Master wants. Not sure the Prince would appreciate this though, Master Terry."

"W-What?" He raised his brows, looked at Avery and Clara, who were laughing like a couple of jackasses, before he looked back to the thrall. "No, they're my friends. They wanted to show me something, and it's... kind of private?" Yeah, now that he took a second to consider the situation, it did seem like he came here to fuck, didn't it. Shit. "I'm not here for anything sexual. This is business."

"Well, whatever you say Master Terry. Just come get me if you need anything." The big woman smiled at him, offered a small bow, and started back up the stairs. Slippers. Big, fuzzy slippers.

Clara started her way through the beads, though she slipped off her boots before she did. Avery too. Heh, well, if they were going to, he might as well. He slipped off his dress shoes, and smirked down at the feel of the thick carpet giving into his weight. He smiled more at the sound of beads knocking against each other as Clara and Avery started to move them. What sort of secret wonder would they find?

They'd find... an orgy.

He rolled his eyes as he stepped into the center of the room, the hanging beads creating thick walls around them. Blankets and pillows of all shapes and colors covered the floor, and from the ceiling hung by a white cable, was a small, dangling statue of a naked woman and naked man, wrapped around each other. Shining like silver, it gently turned in spot, as if nudged by the rising smoke of the humans beneath it.

Like the thrall had said, five women, one man. The man was on his back, laid out upon a purple blanket, hands behind his head, while another woman sat on his pelvis, fucking him. The four other women were interacting with the couple, touching, massaging, caressing, suckling, kissing. All of them were smoking, smoking various things as far as he could tell.

They all turned to look at Avery, and froze.

“Uratha!” one of the women said. “We... we have not spread! We have not devoured or consumed or infected! Only gentle, only urge. Please, you do not need to—”

Avery raised a hand, came up to the orgy, and squatted down beside the group of people. Course she took a peek, smirking as she eyed the veritable feast of flesh before her. Restless Nights kept their workers in good health.

“Not here to send you back, spirit. You've shown a lot of self control.”

“Yes, self control!” another woman said. “Do not need to hunt us.”

“But, I do want you to show yourself. Present yourselves to the vampire here. Or I will send you back.”

The six kine looked at her, and then, like a choir, turned their heads together to look at Jack. One by one, they all started to drift to sleep, bodies slipping into a restful coma on top of each other, chests rising and falling with their dozing. They were all attractive and fit. Restless Nights knew what it was doing, and Jack couldn't help but admire their bodies. No sweat, and the room was a pleasant temperature; must have preferred slow sex. Maybe they—

He jumped back, and opened his eyes wide, as a pink fog began to seep out of their bodies. What in the ever fuck. He froze, stared, and glanced Avery and Clara's way to see what they were doing, if they were going to freak out like he was. But the two of them didn't move, Clara with her hands in her jeans pockets, and Avery only moving enough to get up from her squat. Just watch and wait then, he guessed. They may have been used to seeing strange, bright, gaseous blurs rise up from the sleeping bodies of kine, but he sure wasn't, and he found himself reaching for his knife, kept under his pant leg.



Clara stopped him though, putting a hand on his shoulder and shaking her head, while keeping her eyes on the pink display.

Pink began to form into something solid. Six figures, hovering a foot in the air, each about five feet tall. Arms began to form. Hands, fingers. A waist, hips. No legs though, as if he was looking at six genies from a cartoon. Faces formed upon heads with slender necks. And, as he stared on, he found one of his eyebrows lowering, the other raising higher, as breasts began to solidify on their chests. Some small, some large, and one spirit displayed a set of breasts big enough to dwarf Antoinette's; almost comical, and yet, not, considering the spirit was floating around with no legs. All the curves, the hips and waists, the shoulders into the arms and neck, the back curve into shapely asses, all were emphasized or accented.

Their faces lacked defining shapes, except for solid, glowing blue eyes, and glowing blue lips. Seductive lips, some thick, some thin, but all with small smiles and subtle grins. The pink skin of their forms was see-through, like looking through stained glass art, thick enough it was hard to see to the other side. But as they finished... coalescing, or whatever it was that they were doing, he gulped at the sight of their nipples, blue like their lips. The obviousness of their sexual nature was almost palpable.

"As you can see Jack," Avery said, stepping over the sleeping kine and between the slow hovering spirits, "Vicky and Parker have stumbled onto something they may or may not understand." She reached up, and grinned at him as she flicked her fingers against the small, dangling statue of the two lovers. "This place, one of those 'sex holes' I've heard about, is frequented by sex spirits."

"Sex spirits?"

"Mmhmm. Spirits that live on, feed on, the essence that resonates with sexual pleasure. They're everywhere in the Shadow, in Dolareido. Slut City, right?" She gestured to one of the hovering pink things, and set a hand upon her—its back. Pushing it toward him, Avery laughed, and the spirit, eyes wide with fear upon being touched, grinned after a moment, and let the werewolf push her into him.

Physically touching a spirit. What? He looked at her—it! It, and it put its hands on his shoulders. Without irises or pupils, solid blue eyes were hard to read, but from the slanted squint, and the curling grin, it looked like the spirit was having fun. She dri—it drifted around him, came up behind him, and pushed its breasts into his back. Soft, so very soft, and it felt like human skin, human tenderness, human heat.

"Spirits spread their influence," Clara said. "It's what they live for, it's why they exist. They'll do anything they can to do that, barring getting themselves killed. They pursue it with total one-mindedness."

“But, we do not... spread needlessly. Understanding, yes? We have understanding.” The spirit behind him put its chin on his shoulder, and hugged him all the harder. “Much sexuality from this little one. Can taste it. But, you are dead thing. The Parker, and the Vicky, they can... blush life, it is called? Join us. We will pleasure, prove we do not overstep.”

Avery rolled her eyes, but Clara smirked at him. Yeah, being called out as having ‘much sexuality’ by a sex spirit was a little strange, and if he was blushing life, he’d be blushing until his face bled lava.

Clara must have been thinking it too. “Much sexuality? Hearing that from a sex spirit, call me impressed,” she said.

Another spirit floated to him, one of the thinner ones with small breasts. And then another, the one with the absurd breasts, both reaching out and taking his hands. They tugged on him, tried to pull him toward the sleeping humans, and they giggled as they did. Such lovely sounds, very feminine, very siren. They were very stereotypical too, bleeding sexuality in such obvious, ridiculous ways, to the point it felt surreal. They felt surreal.

“... why do they all look like women?” he said, doing his best to ignore the beautiful creatures tugging on him. Their tugs were gentle enough he could resist them, and dig his socks into the carpet.

“The form spirits take when they manifest isn’t always specific. For a lot it is, but some look different or change in certain ways.” Avery shrugged again, and gestured to one of the spirits. The spirit, on queue, changed forms, adopting a very masculine figure, with the classic V shape for the shoulders to hips, thick arms, defined abs, and... a penis dangling down almost a foot long. Well, shit. Still a pink, floating genie looking entity though, partly see-through, with glowing blue eyes and glowing blue lips.

Both werewolves licked their lips at the same time, at the sight of the spirit, and its new, masculine form. Clara laughed, and stepped in closer to the ‘ideal’ male specimen, almost like she was going to kiss the man. But instead, she grabbed hi—it by the shoulder, and pulled it in close.

“You better not be ruining these humans’ lives, right? If people start dying to drug overdoses here, or fucking till they starve, we’ll—”

“Not! We are not. We do not claim, do not harm.” His new, deep, manly voice came through, such a jarring juxtaposition to the feminine giggles of the others. These spirits were ridiculous.

He was looking at spirits. The absurdity of that took a while to sink in, but right in front of him, pink genie things were hovering around, with tits and dicks and an apparent need to possess humans

and fuck. Spread sexuality? If spirits liked to spread their influence, create more of whatever it is that they were, then these spirits wanted to spread sex and bliss above all else. And from what Clara said, it sounded like spirits were willing to do that at the expense of humans. But, they couldn't, because if they did, the Uratha would interfere. So many questions, he had all the questions, every possible question, he had. But he knew Avery wouldn't answer them. He had to piece together things from the few words they said about it.

Avery gestured to the pile of humans sleeping. Sleeping or, as Jack looked closer, he realized they were high as a kite. It'd take a lot more than some weed to get humans fucked up like these humans were. They groaned, moaned, rolled their heads a little, and made little attempt to do anything other than lay there. At least they looked happy.

"This," Avery said, gesturing to them, "is odd. The spirits here in Dolareido, in Slut City, are understanding and cooperative. That's weird. Normally fuckers like this," Avery grabbed one of the spirits still appearing as a woman, and shook her jaw with a hand, "will do everything and anything to keep spreading whatever it is what they embody. It gets out of control, it takes over, it becomes unstoppable, until a pack of wolves thins the herd."

"... was it like this last time you were here?" he said. "Spirits being unusually cooperative." Asking questions was dangerous, but if he was careful, maybe she'd answer some. The spirit on his back started to run her hands down his shirt, and with little giggles and mewls, her hands found his stomach, slipping into his shirt and rubbing his body.

Clara smirked at him. "Yes. Like Avery said, Slut City is a strange place. Plenty of other cities, especially with ones poking at the Gauntlet like Jacob or Antoinette, are a fucking mess. Spirits of murder, spirits of money, spirits of drugs, spirits of concrete and asphalt, even spirits of howling winds or flickering street lights. These can get out of control and destroy ecosystems, turn nice cities into slums, or turn quaint villages into horrific murder fests for snuff films." Ok, well, at least Clara was being a little more informative than Avery. But at the same time, she was grinning at him as the spirit behind him continued to rub down. "Very sexual, mm?"

"I, um, I don't know—get off me!" He grabbed the spirit's wrists and pulled her off, and she giggled before drifting back toward the pile of humans. "So spirits possess people?"

Avery nodded. "They can. These idiots here," she gestured to the pile of flesh, "are prime real estate for spirits. They can worm their way onto your side of the wall, and attach themselves to a person, urge them to do things. When it gets really bad, they completely take them over, and do whatever they can to keep spreading whatever it is they like."

“Sounds... dangerous. Wait, that Azlu thing, what was that?”

Clara shook her head. “Different thing. Don’t worry about that, just tell us if you see the shit you saw in the tunnels.”

“The point of this little exercise,” Avery said, walking over to him, “was to show you the sort of shit we do. We manage a very elusive prey, Jack, and we keep it from growing out of control. Sometimes that means being strict about things. Minerva started doing things that risked... risked a lot. We told her to stop, and she didn’t listen. So we went to stop it ourselves, but she got in the way, and died for it.” She grabbed his shirt by the collar, and brought him in closer. Such a scary, small woman. “So don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong, and everyone will be happier. Capisce?”

“... yeah, I getcha. Except this—this is probably not a topic to be had around these,” he said, gesturing to both the humans and the spirits.

“May we return to our feast?” the spirits said, as a choir.

“Go nuts.” Avery waved a hand back at them, and made for the stairs.

The spirits sighed, in sync, relieved and content, and slipped back into the bodies of the people they were possessing. Avery had nothing but their word that they weren’t ruining these people’s lives, turning them into meat puppets and possessing them and doing nothing with them but fucking all day, until their lives were in shambles. Then again, the Uratha prowled the city, and far as Jack knew, they also prowled the other side of the ‘Gauntlet’ and did their hunting thing there too. Maybe if the spirits got uppity, it showed up there as well?

His second life was so much easier to wrap his mind around when it was just blood, sex, and money. Now he had monsters, werewolves, gross abomination things, and for the cherry on top, spirits. If a ghost showed up at his apartment one day, at this point, he wouldn’t even blink.

Clara followed after Avery, grinning at him as she slipped past the beads. Once she was through enough of them they could no longer see each other, he looked to the people, the kine, and watched as they came out of their blissful comas. Without losing a beat, they got their hands on each other, into each other, stroking and rubbing. The woman on top of the man started to grind her hips on him, her side to Jack so he couldn’t see what their bits were doing. Probably for the best, he had a hard enough time not thinking about sex with Antoinette every moment of the night, he didn’t need more imagery in his head.

He looked up at the dangling statue of the two lovers. Vicky and Parker probably put it there, and knowingly, knowing what sort of situation would arise from its presence. How it interacted with spirits, what it did, why it did what it did, he hadn't the foggiest, but maybe they did.

Did Bloodlust have something like this?

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Back in the apartment with the werewolves, he grabbed his jacket again, his vest holster and gun, and his silver sword. In its sheath, it looked like a regular sword, and hopefully—Clara snatched it out of his hands, and took it out of the sheath. Fuck fuck fuck.

“We’ve been meaning to talk to you about these,” she said. “Invictus are carrying them, your Sanctum bud waiting outside has one, and according to the boys, even Natasha has one.”

“... we don’t have a choice,” he said.

“Don’t you?” Clara looked to Avery, Monica, and David, but the three of them sat and listened, giving Clara the clear to push the topic. He wished they hadn’t. “You want to be our friend, get us on your side, but the Carthians aren’t walking around with silver swords.”

He winced. They knew it was silver, and the Carthians weren’t walking around with werewolf bane, painting the Invictus and everyone else in a pretty bad light. What do what do what do.

“... you ever hear of the Prisoner’s Dilemma?” he said.

Clara, frowning, tossed him the sword, and he snatched it out of the air. “No.”

He hooked the sword onto his side near the shoulder blade, inside the jacket on the vest holster, out of sight. “Two criminals that were partners in crime have been caught, and are now being questioned in different rooms by the authorities. They are not allowed to communicate with each other. Both are offered a deal. If you both refuse to testify against the other, you both get one year in jail. If you both try and rat each other out, you both get two years in jail. But, if one of you rats the other out, while the other keeps their mouth shut, then the honorable guy, the guy who keeps his mouth shut, gets four years in jail, while the rat gets to walk free. What do you do?”

“Easy, keep my trap shut.” Clara shrugged. Easiest problem in the world, right? She leaned back onto the windowsill, folded her arms across her chest, and raised a brow. “I don’t understand the dilemma. If they both refuse to testify, they only get one year in jail each. It’s measurably the best

outcome. The other two options both have a total of four years in jail. Both keeping quiet has a total of two years in jail, one each.”

“It’s easy because you trust the people you’re working with with your lives, Clara. Because, your pack is your family, and you know you’d die for each other. That’s not a normal circumstance, Clara, that’s an exception. For the overwhelmingly majority of people, the only thing that makes sense is to try and defend themselves against the worst outcome, at the expense of others.”

“... I don’t understand.”

“Each prisoner has incentive to defend themselves by trying to screw over their partner. If you rat your partner out, and they do you as well, you get two years. If you rat them out, and they don’t rat you out, you get zero jail time. In both results, you avoid four years in jail for yourself. But, if you try and be honorable, to protect your fellow prisoner, you open yourself to the possibility of being betrayed, of getting four years, while the rat will get to walk.”

“That... that’s bullshit! That doesn’t make sense, that—”

“That’s people, Clara.” Sighing, he walked for the door, put his hand on the knob, and turned around to look behind him. Everyone was looking at him, eyes intense. They wanted to hear what he had to say. “People don’t think in terms of a group first, they think in terms of themselves first. That’s normal, instinctual. And, when you look at the incentives of that dilemma in the sense of an individual, that individual can defend themselves from a four-year sentence, while at the same time getting either two years in jail, or even zero, by testifying. People think in terms of the self first, and in that mindset, it’s objectively better to rat the other person out. Werewolves don’t think in terms of the self first, I assume; you’re a pack, and you’ll always be a pack. You think in pack terms.”

“... then what hope do you vamps have?” Avery said, one eye squinted as her gaze cut into him. “Humans distrust each other. Vampires distrust each other and everyone, even more. You guys are the rat in this example of yours.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “But, give it time, and we’ll come around. You said you wanted time to get a feel for the city and situation, Avery? We’ll need time, before we can trust you. In the meantime, we’re not stupid enough to trust the other guy, and risk us getting those four years.” He pat his jacket where the silver sword remained hidden. “It sucks, and I hate it, but... yeah, give it time.” Turning and opening the door, he looked over his shoulder at the wolves, and smiled. “And that’s one thing we vamps have in spades.”

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~~Julias~~

Time to make sense of the chaos.

He stood before his covenant, his two fellow councilmen, the three right hands of the council, and all the Invictus Kindred considered to be of senior rank. Isabella Leauvion and Hella Vendram. Bruce Vanna and his friends Vicky Goldman and Parker White. Another eight Kindred were there, each more than twenty years embraced, such as Gloria Jennings; though, Julias wondered if he should talk to that woman. She was getting lazy, and not presenting herself as a good role model for her childe Amanda.

If current circumstances didn't spark her to be more proactive, he'd make her.

Everyone was sitting around the large table of glass, the room dark, with the LED lights above set to dim. The two elders McDonald and Turio sat at the one end, Jessy at the corner by Michael, Damien by Maria opposite of his partner. Damien being there was a little odd, but they were going to have to get used to it. Maybe one day, if the Second Estate ever became a power again, they'd no longer be privy to these meetings. But for now, Damien was one of them.

Jack sat at the other end of the table, near him where Julias was standing, here where all eyes were turned, and Julias had his back to the colossal touch screen that covered the wall. A map of Dolareido was displayed, with every minute detail etched in. Blue lines highlighted streets. Black lines highlighted buildings, with every color in the spectrum used to detail things about the buildings, were shown. Sewer entrances with grades of color representing degrees of safety, and how easily they could disappear into the known abandoned sewers from them, were shown. Symbols with different colors representing Carthian or Invictus control were shown. And points of tension of late, namely the Mirrden District, were highlighted with a gradient of red.

But the map had changed. The building that burned down that held Barry's den, was now in red. The old prison where Jack had been tortured, was now in red. The alley where Jack had been stabbed and kidnapped from, got a little highlight of red. Another map, the sewer map, was displayed beside the Dolareido map, and the area where Azamel had made her home, was now in red.

"There is too much red on this map," he said, frowned at it, and then at his Invictus. In particular, he did not like that little strip of red near the Invictus ballroom, the Fall Palace. It was deep in South

Side, and was the only bit of red in such an inconvenient place. “Do we have an explanation for this hole yet, Isabella?”

She shrugged, and leaned back in her chair. “Thralls were around, guarding. Not only ours, but reports had sightings of some of the Prince’s thralls as well, blending in with nearby crowds. Video footage of the area is plentiful, except for the alleys around behind the building, for no other reason than the target is not a priority to our enemies.”

“Enemies?” he said. “Be specific.”

“... sorry, I meant the Carthians. I know, they’re not our enemies, but... apologies.”

He gave Isabella some leeway. Some. She was one of the older Kindred, and she was around during tenser times with the Carthians. Plus, she was Garry’s opposite, and the two of them hated each other. Hostility was to be expected, but not tolerated.

“This brings up a valuable point,” he said, and he gestured to the group. “Unless the Carthians stir trouble, you are not to provoke them. I hope that is obvious. Even Alder Honors made attempts to keep relations smooth with Garry.” The man had been invited to their balls, after all. “Master Terry insists Avery won’t show up on our doorstep looking for a fight if we start pushing Garry around, but that’s not the point. Until these hunters are expunged, the Carthians are our friends. understood?”

Hella leaned forward onto the table, eyebrow raised. “Our friends? You know that Joe fucker broke my arm a year ago? I still owe him som—”

He snapped his gaze to her, shutting her up. “Madam Vendram, if you so much as look at Joe with anger in your eyes, I will break your mind and force you to cut off your own fingers, and eat them. Do I make myself clear?”

“... yes, Mister Mire.” She lowered her gaze, and leaned back into her seat. Not happy being pinned in by a ruling, but too scared of him to argue the point. Good. If he had to use fear to get these idiots to not make things worse, than he would.

He started to pace, with occasional glances to his childe. Jack had raised a brow at him, when he threatened Hella, but he recovered quickly. It wasn’t like his childe would disagree with him, but Julias didn’t like encouraging the boy to do what Ventrue often did to get their way: break the minds of whoever they wanted to do their bidding. Then again, when trying to corral a bunch of vampires to use their brains and consider the future in their actions, he’d use whatever worked.

A slippery slope. What separated someone like him from a dictator? A totalitarian? He thought what he was doing was for the best of the city, and the Invictus. But then, leaders of totalitarian



governments sometimes did as well. It was so easy for a Ventrue to be convinced they knew what was best, that they should be obeyed because they were smarter, better, than the others. It was a slippery slope he had to navigate carefully, before he fell and smashed his skull open on the jagged rocks waiting beneath him.

“Moving on,” he said. “Areas where Kindred congregate are now considered priority targets. The hunters are not Carthians, they’re not looking to spread territory or establish footholds. They’re looking to kill us.”

Bruce raised a hand, and Julias nodded to let him speak. “I thought the hunters were here for Azamel, and the other monsters. We could step aside and—”

“We’ve considered the option,” he said. That got a little more of an eye raise from Jack, but the boy sighed, nodded, and put his eyes back onto the map behind Julias. It’d only been logical to consider that option, and his childe would know that. Hopefully. “But it would be a fool’s hope. These hunters are experienced, and this Angela and Jeremiah are particularly deadly, and driven. They are zealots. They’ll burn this city to the ground to get to us, if only because we helped the Begotten once already.” He reached out to the screen, and swiped. A picture of a man came up, an older man, with tattoos on his neck, but otherwise his body was hidden in the trench coat. “This is Jeremiah, correct Master Terry?”

“Correct.”

“This picture was taken by Invictus in another city. Jeremiah passed through that city, after ten Kindred deaths.” Communicating with other Invictus, and asking for information, was always a mixed bag. The more autonomous a city, the better. Signs of weakness could be met with other Invictus coming to take command, or sending enforcers to deal with imbalances if they thought it worth the trouble. But interest in Dolareido from outside establishments was rare; Antoinette kept the city in good control, comparatively speaking.

“Confirmation that they’re his kills?” Damien said. Everyone in the group looked at him, each with a degree of annoyance, each with a bit of surprise. It wasn’t entirely normal for Invictus Kindred to question their superiors. For someone not Invictus to do it was fingernails on chalkboard.

But, Julias didn’t mind so much. Skepticism was intelligence made manifest. “The Invictus are nothing if not thorough, Mister Burksen.”

“I see.”

The man in the picture had a distinct look, with the faded remains of scars cutting across his nose, some scars along his jaw interrupting the short gray beard, and one along the head exposing some of his scalp through his short gray hair. He oozed experience, a veteran of his twisted sport.

“Take a good look everyone, this is the man we’re worried about. This is a hunter with a lot of years and a lot of kills under his belt.” Again Julias began to pace, now with his hands in the small of his back, head down. Classic pensive, thoughtful pose, and with the hands behind him, it no doubt made him look like a contemplating, wise leader. Image was everything.

“An attractive, older man,” Isabella said, which got a weird glance from everyone, before she chuckled and shrugged. “For some, I am sure.”

Julias pointed to the man’s neck. “You can see he has tattoos, but hunters do not normally have many identifying marks like this, unless they have a good reason. Based on Jack’s report, it would appear the man has access to some unusual items as well, perhaps enchanted. Jeremiah would not be the first hunter to tattoo enchanted markings onto his body.”

Jessy raised a hand. “Um, enchanted? I mean, I read the report, and enchanted sounds like a bit of a stretch.”

Julias motioned to his child. If there was someone he could count on to be both methodical, and to not exaggerate in his reports, it was him.

“I’ve seen magic at work before,” Jack said, turning to look back at the table and toward Jessy. “I don’t use the word enchanted lightly. I—”

“Wait, you’ve seen magic at work before?” Hella leaned in again, and tilted her head to the side. “Magic?”

But before Jack could say anything, Maria raised a hand, and waved it aside in a gentle dismissal. “Master Terry was present when Lucas assaulted the Prince. Both he and Mister Burksen can testify that the Archbishop used magic to assault the Prince. Theban Sorcery.”

Damien lifted a finger off the table. “We of the Lancea et Sanctum consider them to be miracles of a sort, but only those of both great power and great faith can summon them so readily.”

Maria shook her head. “We have seen other, magical acts and objects, done outside the grasp of the Second Estate. The Circle of the Crone perform their blood rituals, and the Ordo Dracul have... flirted, with similar tools before.”

Hella winced, leaning back in her chair again. Perhaps the Gangrel had been living in denial that magic existed; it was certainly easier to pretend it didn't. Far kinder to a Kindred's mind to consider themselves the only supernatural things walking around.

"I felt the difference," Jack said, "between having those cuffs on, and off." Looking down at his wrists, he took a little time to rub one, then the other. Getting your hands chopped off must have been horrible. Being the one that forced that madness must have been a strange feeling indeed. "It was hard, pulling up my vitae, when I had them on. Very hard, like it was being suppressed. On top of that, I looked Angela and Jeremiah in the eyes, from only inches away. They didn't feel normal, they didn't feel like kine."

"Elaborate for the others," Julias said, gesturing to the table. The report had explained, but only the council and the right hands had read it. Time to get everyone up to speed.

"... they felt like... they felt indomitable. They felt like the sort humans that would walk into a monster's lair, and without hesitation, throw themselves into a pit of snakes to fight the gorgon. Real, crazy, psycho types, you know?" He shivered, and rubbed his head a few times, before he forced his hand back to the table. Old habits die hard. "The others, the hunters they had working for them, felt like normal kine. They were afraid of me, and had all the stress signs of normal humans. But the other two, Jeremiah and Angela, they... no, they weren't like the others. They weren't normal."

"Then what are they?" Bruce said.

Jack shrugged. "Not Kindred, not Uratha, not Begotten. They looked human, and they smelled human, but..."

"There are other things out there," Michael said, leaning forward onto the table, elbows against it, fingers netted together, "than those things the good Master Terry has mentioned. Dolareido has rarely, in its history, had to deal with them, but there are other terrors in this world of darkness we live in. I do not think such terrors are what we're dealing with, though. No, it would be a strange thing indeed for anything other than a human to be working with these hunters, especially in this manner, with this goal to kill the Begotten, and us."

Jessy looked confused, eyebrow raised, and eyes glancing between Jack and Michael's contradicting statements. "Then what are they?"

"We're... not sure," Julias said. "Azamel might know something, but as informative as Jack's meetings with the old monster have been, she's refused to give us a direct response on anything. Until we know more, assume that Jeremiah and Angela are both extremely dangerous."

The group of Kindred sighed, but nodded. ‘Extremely dangerous’ carried some implications with it, and no one liked them.

“Master Terry’s latest meeting with the Uratha,” Julias said, “has gone both well, and poorly. As I said earlier, we are less concerned that Avery will become a threat to us, but at the same time, she is unwilling to help us with the hunters until she feels more comfortable with the situation and the city. Master Terry has told me she wishes an exchange of trust, before it can progress further. Two of her pack mates will be moving into Carlava Villa, and we will be showing them the utmost respect. Understood?”

“We bending over for these people?” Jessy said.

Her words got her a hard glare from her sire, and she shrank into her seat.

Julias squinted his eyes at her. “Some minor gamesmanship is hardly bending over, Madam Herrington. And last I checked, you’ve submitted for one of the grand suites in the Carlava Villa to be given to your new friend, the kine who saved Jack’s life. Should I question your motives there?”

Bringing in the woman’s personal decisions into a business meeting might have been unwarranted or unprofessional, but Kindred were different. There was no separation between work and life, they were the same thing, despite how some Kindred did their best to keep them separate. And Jessy knew that, better than most.

“Wasn’t suggesting it was a bad move, Mister Mire,” she said, a grin sneaking up onto her lips despite her resigned pose. “Just wanted to know how far we’re taking this. And Eric will prove a valuable ally with time, I’m sure.”

Turio didn’t look convinced. “He’d be better off a thrall or ghoul, Madam Herrington. Trusting him is foolish.”

“... I think I can understand Madam Herrington’s decision,” Jack said. “Thralls and ghouls are tainted, their minds warped in ways that make them... reliable, but they lack the spark of a wildcard. Eric’s behavior, what little I saw of it, and from what Beatrice and Fiona have told me, is a defining example of that behavior. As long as he does not learn anything that can be used against us, or tortured out of him for that purpose, I agree with my partner’s course of action. He will be of use.” Everyone looked his way, Julias included. Jack didn’t normally talk to Maria, if only because it was probably easier for him to not, not since he’d killed Lucas. And for a fresh neonate to talk without being asked was almost insubordinate. For him to speak to her in the middle of an important Invictus meeting, and to go against what she said, was a huge step out of his comfort zone. Julias smiled.

So did Maria. “Well said, Master Terry.” The ghost lady offered him a nod, and sat back straight in her chair. Jessy’s grin turned into a warmer smile, and she shared it Jack before she sat up straight too. Kid’s knack for smoothing out bumps of tension manifested everywhere.

“Back onto topic,” Julias said. “If you see Jeremiah, and you think you have an opportunity to kill him, take it. Understand the danger of the situation, and that in all likelihood, you thinking you can kill him is actually a trap set up by him to bait you. But I’m not going to say don’t try if you think you can do it. He needs to die.

“This brings us onto our final point of this meeting. As some of you know, the woman Jeremiah has recruited, Angela, a person Jack considers to be of similar... degree of danger, as Jeremiah, is Athalia’s daughter.”

The right hands and the council were unfazed, but for everyone else, this was new information. Isabella, Bruce, Hella, Gloria, Vicky, Parker, all of them raised a brow, and looked at him as they sat up straight and put their hands on the table.

Julias swiped the screen again. No picture this time, but a drawing, made for them by a forensic sketch artist in their employ, and Jack’s description.

“The picture doesn’t do it justice,” Jack said. “The glass eye, I mean.”

“As my childe says, she has a glass eye, so identifying her will be reasonably easy. Unless she exchanges it with a less-obvious piece, which is possible.” But, he pointed to the huge scar that cut across the forehead, down through the eye socket, and down into her cheek. There were other scars too on her face, similar to Jeremiah’s, though less in quantity. “Black skin like her mother, but she buzzes her hair. Remember this face. Master Terry assures me it is otherwise an accurate picture.”

It was Gloria this time to raise her hand. Strange, considering how much she preferred to shut up when in meetings.

“I uh, I think I... yeah, um, I remember Athalia. Stirred up some trouble, around twenty years ago, right? Very dangerous woman? We were told to avoid her and let the sheriff handle her?”

Ah, right, that.

“The sheriff didn’t kill her, Madam Jennings, if that’s what you’re wondering. She was a new Begotten, and the Ordo Dracul are more familiar with them than we are. But, after some time, she left the city. She’s returned on a couple of occasions, never for long.”

“I get that, b-but, I mean, if... we kill Angela, then—”

“Then nothing.” Enough of this. “We owe Athalia nothing, and we have a right to defend ourselves.” He slammed his palms against the table, and everyone jerked in their seats; except, of course, for the council. “We have a right to do more than that. Dolareido is our city, a Kindred city. The kine are ours, we’ve cultivated them, spent decades, centuries for some of us, raising them. We protect them from themselves and keep this city a safe place, statistically speaking. If anyone encroaches upon it, we are beholden to no one but our own. Kill her if you get the chance, and if issues arise with Athalia, then we will kill her as well. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir,” they said.

“Good. Dismissed.”