

~~Jack~~

He woke up, wet and broken. Someone rolled him over, but his eyes were closed, and opening them took a little more effort than he felt like using at the moment. But once on his back, rain hit his face, and his chest. Wasn't he wearing a suit? Shouldn't that block the rain? Oh, right, the fight he'd been in had thoroughly destroyed it.

Pain came next. He groaned as his body did its thing, and what little vitae he had left got to work forcing his shoulders back into their sockets. His neck straightened out; spine was fucked up. His legs straightened out, arms too. Everything got back together just enough that they worked, and he could feel the wrecked muscles screaming with agony.

But at least everything was working again, so he opened his eyes. Yeap, this was still the nightmare chamber that belonged to Azamel, the one that looked like Dolareido. Red rain fell on his face, and he stared up into the strange red sky as it did. He was still alive.

“Jack,” a booming voice said.

“Azamel.” He sighed relief as he sat up. Tried to sit up. His right hand found the street just fine, but his left hand didn't, cause it didn't exist. He almost fell over, but rebalanced and sat up eventually. Relieved as hell that it was Azamel, but god damn, everything hurt.

Slowly, Jack looked around, taking stock. Michael stood nearby, suit and body in better condition than Jack's, but the man struggled to keep standing. Too proud to just sit the fuck down. Garry wasn't. The other Gangrel sat ten feet off, by the curb in front of the now exposed basement they'd been fighting in. Just like Michael, his skin was royally fucked, covered in bite marks. The two Gangrel probably healed or resisted the first thousand rat bites, but the next thousand got through, and left their mark. If Kindred blood was as thin as human blood, they'd both be bleeding to death.

Jack looked down. The necklace was back on, thank god. Fuck you Ripper.

Jack found the Ripper's thoughts, the curse's impulses, it's almost erotic need to destroy and maim, and cast them into the candle in his mind. Not easy to do, with fire burning through his muscles and bones, but getting thoroughly trashed was becoming so routine, he adapted quickly. When his thoughts were clear and normal again, Jack looked back up at Azamel.

There she sat, literally five feet in front of him, cross legged so one of her enormous shins was beside him, like a wall. Her scimitars were still on the street, and her other weapon, or fishing tool or whatever it was, was still a scattered mess. She wasn't even trying to clean it up.

“You appear normal again,” Azamel said.

“Thank god,” Garry said. “That was... not fucking right.”

The other Gangrel nodded. “Indeed. I was... unprepared for how vicious it would be. And strong.”

Jack laughed, but it switched to an aching cough, and he clutched his chest with his only hand. Yeah, those ribs didn't like doing that.

“You can see why I want to get rid of it now, right?”

“Yes. I can.”

Jack nodded, and looked to Garry, then back to Michael. “You guys... aren't fighting anymore.”

Garry sighed as he shook his head. “You made... some good points, Jack.”

Apparently Jack's boss didn't agree, or at least didn't like agreeing. Michael's scoffed, and shrugged. “You warned us something else was happening in the city, something I only have... a small awareness of. That sounded more important than my quarrel with Garry.”

The Carthian leader laughed, but got the same result as Jack, wincing as his laugh ground to a halt. Yeah, none of them could do so much as bend over slightly without getting run over with pain, let alone laugh.

“If you hadn't spared Tilly, I'd say this was all bullshit. But I owe you for that.”

Oh thank god, finally, communication. Actual talking.

“And...” Michael sighed and nodded toward the giant elephant monster. “Azamel spared us, if we agreed to a truce.”

Spared. Scary to think Azamel was in a position to kill all three of them. Well, they had beaten each other fucking senseless.

No. Michael and Garry hurt him, and they'd hurt each other, but the Ripper beat the two Gangrels. It... he won that fight. And the only reason they were alive, and Jack was down, was because one of the most powerful entities probably on the fucking planet tricked him, pulled him into her nightmare realm where she was basically a god, and smashed him into the street hard enough to flatten a car. Multiple times.

“A truce is a good idea,” Jack said. “And you fucking know it.”

The two men sneered, at the same time. Which made them glance at each other, groan, and look away.

“Maybe,” Garry said.

“Maybe? I remember what the Ripper said. He... told you guys a lot of shit I’d prefer he didn’t. But like Michael said, he warned you about something more difficult than your fucking stupid quarrel.”

Michael growled. “It’s not—”

“It’s fucking ludicrous. People are dead!”

Garry got up, teetered a bit, and pointed a finger at Jack. “Then why didn’t you tell us about it!?”

“Because you were both so fucking head-up-your-asses angry at each other over stupid shit, we knew neither of you were smart or mature enough to handle the information! You’d tip off the enemy!” Jack shrugged, and regretted it immediately, grumbling as the boiling pain smacked him around again. “Avery is your friend, Garry, and even she didn’t spill the beans. The fuck does that tell you?”

Garry glared at him for a few seconds before sighing and sitting down on the curb again, slowly, like an old man. He didn’t look any of them in the eye anymore.

Jack spared a glance for Azamel. She sat there, breathing heavy and deep, like she was permanently winded. But she seemed willing to let him keep going on his rant. Hell, looked like she wanted him to.

“Michael. What happened between you and Amanda?”

Michael sighed as he looked away. “She told me a friend of hers, a kine, was killed by Carthians in a brawl. She said the Carthians were reckless, hungry for violence, and accidentally shot her friend while starting a fight with some Invictus. Amanda wanted revenge. She came to me with a plan, and I agreed.”

“Yeah. Fuck you.” Garry held up his hand to Michael, middle finger up.

That sounded a little strange. He hadn’t heard anything like that from Invictus reports. “Did you double check the info?”

“No. She came to me the same night Garry attacked Xnomina. What reason would Amanda have to lie? It was a perfect opportunity.”

Too fucking perfect. Something wasn’t right.

“Make sure when you un-stake her that I’m there, Michael. Just you, me, and her. Damien too.”

Giving his boss orders was a recipe for confrontation, and Michael glared at him, broken and torn up face ready to pop. But just like Garry, he took a few seconds to think about it — finally, some motherfucking god damn reason — and nodded.

Jack looked back up to Azamel. “You knew I was going to deal with these two like this?”

“Of course.”

“How?”

Shrugging, the giant elephant gestured down at her side.

And out came Mark, a pile of squirming insects and rot. Literally. But at least Mark wore a dark, skin-like robe, giving his shape a human form, normal size. He had a skeleton in there too, but hard to see, among all the bugs crawling in and out of it.

He came out of the fucking shadow, something even the best Mekhet would struggle to do. The disgusting bastard was so damn good, Michael jumped back, and Garry almost jumped up ready to fight, before he realized the man wasn't a threat. Surprise, to fight-or-flight, to eventual disgust, as the man's rotting odor spread.

“Mark,” Jack said. “Didn't the Prince warn you about spying on me?”

The man smirked. “I spied on you, not her.”

Azamel chuckled, and lifted one of her fingers, closest to Mark. A subtle gesture, and Mark disappeared into her shadow again. Holy fuck he was good. No wonder he had the guts to spy on the Prince and Daniel in their own tower.

“I prepared,” she said. “It is not easy to open a tunnel the way I did.”

“Why did you?” he asked.

“Because if I hadn't, what would I be leaving my family? A broken city, about to suffer the wrath of an infantile curse.”

He sighed as he looked her up and down. It took a lot out of her to do that. It took a lot out of her to flip a building and catch three powerful vampires, too. A lot out of her.

Nodding, Jack looked between the two Gangrels, thinking. He could keep yelling at them, and he kinda wanted to, but at this point both men were willing to talk. Yelling no longer required.

“Garry, Michael... Roland wo—”

Michael stepped closer and shook his head. “Don’t, Mister Terry.” Oh hey, he had a title again. “I can only forgive so much. You used a deeply personal issue between Garry and I to confront us. I... can understand why, and you made points I have to consider. Perhaps Garry and I have been letting our past poison our interactions.”

Holy shit, what the fuck did they say to each other while he was out? Did Azamel play peacekeeper?

“But,” Michael continued, “you are no longer to speak of it. Understand? So much as mention Roland’s name, and it will not end well for you.”

Jack nodded as he smiled up at the man. What Michael wanted to say, but couldn’t, was Jack finally punched a little sense into his thick skull, but he better not try it twice.

“You’ll start going to Primogen meetings again?”

“Yeah,” Garry said, “so calm down. We already said truce. First thing we do when we get back, is get our covenants to back off each other.”

“And Jeremy Long?”

“What about him? Dude is a cutthroat businessman, and he has the connections and the tech I needed.” He shrugged. “And you probably noticed, he ain’t no pussy Ventrue or Invictus.”

Michael and Jack rolled their eyes. Ok, well, insults were a lot better than bullets and fire grenades.

“And Mister Terry,” Michael said, “we will be asking for more information about this threat you warned us about.”

“I... I’ll try and tell you what I can. But the more you know, the riskier shit gets.”

The man rumbled in his throat. “Risk it.”

“I think,” Azamel said, “that these two dogs have calmed enough to see reason.” Of course she could insult them all she wanted.

“Ok, yeah, I’ll tell you. Um, tomorrow? It’s a long conversation, and it can wait a night.”

“Very well. It has been a trying night,” Michael said. Bastard could barely stand, and called it a trying night, like he’d just done a heavy workout.

Jack looked to Garry. “Avery will tell you everything. Just tell her about what happened tonight.”

“I will. She better have answers.”

“If you want to know more after me and Avery have explained stuff, ask Natasha, or the Prince directly. They’ve been dealing with it a lot more than I have. I’ve had my hands full.”

Garry laughed. A big, full, happy laugh. What the fuck.

“Yeah, I guess you have.” He raised his left hand, and wiggled his fingers.

Even Michael laughed. Not as loud as Garry, but he laughed, before they both groaned quietly in pain. Fucking assholes.

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Michael and Garry left. They promised the first thing they’d do when they were outside the nightmare was call a ceasefire. He believed them. Some guys just needed to throw fists in order to calm down and see reason. Typical guy thing. Jack couldn’t wrap his mind around that sort of mentality, but he damn well knew a lot of guys who thought with their fists better than their heads. And reconciled with them too, evidently.

Tomorrow night, Michael and Jack would un-stake Amanda, and figure out what the fuck was going on.

Jack stayed in the nightmare. He wanted to talk to Azamel, and he was terrified it was going to be a painful, heavy conversation.

“I will release the animals you brought with you into the dream. The rats and crows.”

“Thanks.” He dragged himself back up to his feet, and leaned back against a car. “Christ I’m hungry.” He glanced again at the monster’s giant ruined tools that she made no effort to clean up before he looked up at her.

“Do not worry, Jack. I think you made your point to those men. They will still antagonize each other, and occasionally serve as enemies, but you have successfully earned a truce between them. Similar future negotiations will be easier.”

He wasn’t worried about that. He was worried about the giant elephant monster who looked like she was about to keel over and die.

“Thank god. Christ, how can anyone stomach politics for five seconds? The people who actually do shit with it, are the morons, and they have power and money and... you can’t do fucking shit about them without doing something drastic.”

“Power is not given to those who deserve it. It is given to those who either stumble upon it, or are willing to take it from others.” She shrugged, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world. “If those who deserved it were simply given it, the world would be... boring.”

He laughed, but it stopped quick as his ribs stabbed into him again. Yeah, his body wasn’t healing very fast anymore. He was running on fumes, getting very hungry, and he hadn’t even tried to regrow his arm yet. Strong as the curse was, it couldn’t make something from nothing.

“Azamel, I... Thank you. If not for you, the curse would have killed those two morons.”

“Most likely.”

“And it... he...”

“The curse grows stronger, each time it takes over, doesn’t it, little vampire? Stronger and more difficult to force out of your mind.”

Jack clutched his necklace. “Yeah.”

“And you have found no way to destroy it?”

He shivered as he looked down. “Black Blood says he—it can. Or not destroy, so much as remove and take.”

“A dangerous bargain. We already suspect the creature of threatening an apocalypse, and you think it will help you?”

“Only to help itself. I dunno if Black Blood will eat it, or bind it and use it on someone else, or what.”

“Then I suggest you find another way to deal with it. I will not be here the next time it needs to be dealt with.”

He winced. “Christ, I’m sorry. I... I didn’t know you’d help. I didn’t know you’d... You can’t find someone to eat to feel better?”

The elephant ran one of her human hands down her trunk, but set it back on her knee as she struggled to stay sitting upright.

“I am afraid not, little vampire. I may not be dead yet, but I will be. Soon.”

Soon. She said it softly, and that just made it all the worse. She didn't mean weeks or months, she meant tonight.

"This is my fault."

She laughed, a weak and winded sound. "Is it? Jeremiah has hunted me for decades, Jack. This is his fault, and mine."

Jeremiah. Just hearing the name was enough to send a pulse of rage through Jack, and looking at the dying woman only made it a thousand times worse.

"We saw the flashback in Jeremiah's ritual. I thought you were being pretty reasonable."

"About ruling a city as a monster? About exiling my sheriff?"

"All things considered, yeah? Far as human and monster relations go, you had something going there. Something... not all that far from Dolareido, kinda."

She chuckled, a little bit of the sound coming through her elephant trunk and making a trumpet noise.

"Perhaps. It doesn't matter. If I had done things differently, as Antoinette does them, then maybe things would not be as they are. Or maybe I'd have died much, much younger."

"A life well lived, then?"

"I think so. My inheritance is beyond my reach, but perhaps that is for the best. The new generation will be a fine replacement."

"What is this inheritance? Antoinette talked about it, but none of us are really sure what it means."

She smiled down at him, as much as an elephant face can smile, tusks in the way and all.

"You think I am powerful now, little vampire. Imagine what I could do in this world if I were a true monster."

"True monster? I thought Begotten were true monsters? You've said as much."

"We are... potential true monsters." She leaned forward over him, one set of hands on her knees, the other set pressing on the street. "You have no doubt noticed my kin cannot merge with our Horrors in the physical world."

"Yeah. But I see glimpses of it sometimes, when you're fighting and stuff."

"Indeed. Begotten are limited by the duality of the human and the Horror. But there are ways to overcome this... flaw, to become a beast and Horror incarnate. I could walk the realm of the real, in a



form such as mine now, to transform into at leisure. I could reach out and crush the minds and dreams of all within my grasp. I could master my hunger. I could... become legend, Jack Terry. I could have become a true myth.”

“Myth?”

“Tales of my existence, whispers, stories in books, pictures painted by dreaming artists, songs and poems. True Begotten who become more than they were become monsters of legend, vampire. That was my goal. I came to Dolareido when Jeremiah found my trail, and I planned to defeat him and his companions here.” She sighed as she looked up to the red sky. “Imagine it, little vampire. Imagine the tale of the hunters who came to defeat the great Azamel, and her friend Athalia. A man, hunting his once lover and ruler. A girl, hunting her mother, only to find her defended by a great and terrible monster. What a tale. It would have been legen—”

“Wait for it... Dary!”

She looked down at him, and blinked.

Jack threw up his hands. Hand. “Sorry, shitty joke from TV.” And him, trying to distance himself from how much it hurt her to hear her say all these things, each word raspy and exhausted.

It would have been kinda scary, and maybe a problem, if Azamel became some sort of literal monster who could go walking around, being a tyrant. Like, a fucking actual dragon or kraken or something. But now her dreams were crushed, and now she was dying. It fucking sucked.

And the last thing she wanted to do with her life was make Dolareido a better place for the other Begotten. Christ, Jack couldn't even begin to think in those terms, think ‘I'm going to die, better do everything I can to help those closest to me first before I go’. How the fuck does someone think that way?

She was old, and she wasn't a vampire. That's how.

“You may go now, Jack. The city needs peace, if you're to prevent this darkness I sensed from destroying everything.”

“You want me to go? You sure?”

“I am sure.”

Jack looked down the street, where Garry and Michael had disappeared into a building, a storage building. Azamel had created a doorway to the physical world there.

“... you’re sure you sure? There’s no one else here. I don’t want to leave you... alone, you know? I—”

Mark appeared from the shadow of a nearby bus stop. Damn that guy was good.

“She’s not alone. I’ll make sure Fiona and Athalia are here, too. I can have them here in minutes.”

Jack nodded as he looked down. Yeah, that made sense. If Azamel wanted to die with her family, that was a hell of a lot better than dying alone.

It was funny. She was such a bitch, such a massive pain in their ass, but to the three she’d been protecting, she was the quintessential grandmother. Jack didn’t know his grandmothers, but if they were anything like Azamel, at least how she was supposedly like around Fiona and Athalia, he wouldn’t leave them to die alone. He’d stay right the fuck here and be with them until the end.

A part of him wanted to insist. A larger part of him knew that was wrong, weird, and awkward. She wanted to be with her family when she died. That wasn’t him.

“Thanks,” he said. To Azamel, not Mark. Fuck that guy. “I know you helped me because you want to help your family, but... you still helped me. Now, and other times. And I’m still sorry that I couldn’t fix it. I—”

“You cannot fix everything, little vampire. That is an essential lesson in life, and one you seem to struggle with.” She coughed. Azamel in her human body coughed constantly, especially after Jeremiah wounded her, but Azamel the monster never coughed. She did now, and it sounded guttural, loud, and awful. “Learn to accept that failure is not always, and often not, because you made mistakes, or did not do your best. Will you berate yourself because six Kindred have died in this turf war?”

Will he? He already had. Bruce was dead. Joe was dead. They were entirely his fault. Weren’t they?

Azamel shook her head before he could say anything. “I have known many like you, Jack. You have an honest soul, and are full of empathy. But you must learn to harden yourself, or your desire to help others, to fix every problem you stumble upon whether you are involved or not, will break you. You will withdraw into yourself and try to hold the world at bay, as its pain and agony carve scars into your soul. You will grow bitter, and cynical. And I know you are intelligent enough to have seen this.”

Story of his life. Azamel would have been a great therapist, if she talked to him when his dad died. He had closed in on himself when that happened, and hurt his mother doing so. He’d gotten better about it since his first death, and the idea of going back to being a closed off, cynical asshole, criticizing

every flaw around him, terrified him. If it wasn't for Antoinette, he probably would have already, with all the shit that kept coming his way.

“Listen to me, Jack. The last words of an old monster who has made a million mistakes. Do not destroy yourself carrying the pains or burdens of others. Everyone must carry their own anchors, and while friends and family can help each other, you will destroy yourself trying to carry everyone's.”

“I—”

“Do not argue, little vampire. I do not have the time or energy left.”

“You're... you're right. Thanks, again.” He couldn't even look her in the eye.

She nodded, and gestured to the building down the street. “Go. Make sure those two dogs put an immediate end to this war.”

He turned, walked toward the building, got two steps, and spun around. “Azamel, I—”

“Go, Jack.”

“But what about you? I can't—”

“Do not worry for me.” Even as she said it, she struggled to stay sitting. The arm on her knee slid down to the street, and she leaned forward as her own weight dragged her down. She had to brace all four hands on the ground to keep from collapsing. Her breathing grew heavier and ragged, and her trunk dangled until it nearly hit the asphalt.

“Of course I worry! You're dying! How can you just accept that!? How—”

“Jack.” She sighed again, smiling as she slowly shook her giant head. “I am glad to have met you. I am glad to have helped you. I am... content.”

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~~Damien~~

Damien checked his phone. A text had come in a few minutes ago, apparently.

~All Invictus, cease and desist any and all combat with the Carthians. Mister Tones and I have come to an agreement and a truce. Right Hands and senior members, report to the Xnomina Headquarters tomorrow night, 23:00.~

Damien blinked at the phone, several times, before showing it to Jessy. She blinked at him, the phone, then pulled hers out and did the same. They were sitting on a rooftop, Cloaked, and hiding from a dozen Carthians out roof hopping trying to find them. The phones didn't buzz or make a sound, but the two vampires were hiding and didn't have much to do for the moment. Good thing he checked.

Damien shrugged, pointed at the two of them, then toward the fastest street out of the Carthian district, and shrugged again. No reason to not just walk out then? They were about to take one of the more scenic routes to get around the patrols, but if things were called off, then no reason to not just walk back? On the road? Out in the open?

No, probably a bad idea. The Carthians might not have—

Jessy stood up, and threw up a hand. “Hey! Whatever assholes are chasing us, check your phones! If you can afford one, you broke bastards!”

Damien facepalmed hard enough it made a slap sound. “Jessy, Garry might not have sent them a message yet.”

“Ah come on, you think Michael would send that message first? Pretty sure they'd stand next to each other, and actively watch each other send the message, ready to fuck each other up if one of them tried to trick the other, you know?”

That was true. Damien slowly stood up, and checked around the rooftop for any pursuers. No one. He pulled out his binoculars, and spotted one vampire on a rooftop a good ways away. They were looking at their phone.

“Either way.” Damien touched her shoulder, and wrapped them in his Cloak of Night again. “I don't trust the Carthians to not take a shot at us for fun, or they might say they shot us before the message was received.”

“Dude you are paranoid.”

“You would do well to be a little more paranoid.”

“Ha. You sound like my sire.” She started down the fire escape, and he followed after her. “So, you think Jack convinced them?”

“Yes. And probably not without a fair bit of violence.”

“Yeah, probably. I’ll go back to HQ and check up on Michael. You?”

“Back to my apartment.” Or Fiona’s. He was starving. After two hours of playing hide and seek with a bunch of Carthians, draining his blood reserves to fuel his Cloak, reapplying the Cloak over and over, he was quite drained. If necessary, he’d feed on a random kine, but Fiona preferred to be the one he fed on.

Feeding on someone frequently wasn’t healthy for the prey, if done too frequently in a small time frame. But Fiona healed quickly, and he was happy to indulge. It almost always led to sex, and he’d grown quite addicted to both the rush her monster blood sent through him, but also the sex. One more step to becoming yet another proper Dolareidian.

Another text came in, from Jack, from one of his backup phones. He did have a habit of getting them destroyed.

~You guys ok?~

~Yeah, we’re fine. Distraction work?~

~Yeah, worked great, thanks. Got Michael and Garry talking. It was brutal.~

Damien showed Jessie the conversation, before he called Jack. Texting would forever be a frustrating nuisance.

“The meeting tomorrow night,” Damien said. “You’ll be there?”

“Yeap. And before that, Michael’s taking me to Amanda. I want you there. Jessie can go out and make sure the Invictus and Carthians fucking listen to the truce order while we deal with that problem.”

“Any idea about why Michael staked her?”

“Yeah. Amanda gave him a story about Carthians killing a kine friend of hers, so she wanted revenge. I’m mostly sure it’s bullshit. Something’s up.”

“Will you Dominate her to learn the truth?”

“I’d prefer to not. And that’ll only help if she’s lying. Can you use Auspex to gleam some truth from her?”

“I can try.” It was not Damien’s strong suit. Speed, stealth, sure. He’d even glimpsed the past from objects on occasion with Auspex, or caught a peek at a hidden truth about someone. What Jack was asking for was Auspex’s ability to sync Damien’s mind to a victim’s, essentially becoming them for a time. A useful trick for uncovering memories or discovering secrets buried in a person’s mind. It

was not something Damien could do, or at least not well. It was something Lucas struggled to do, and used rarely.

“Think I should ask the sheriff?” Jack asked.

“It may come to that. But the man is busy.” Hunting for anything he could about Black Blood and the ritual, no doubt. “I think we should talk with Amanda first.”

“Agreed. Let me talk to Jessy for a bit?”

Damien handed Jessy the phone.

“Dude, you got Garry and Michael to fuck off? How? Wait, seriously? Holy fuck dude, that’s awesome! Oh... Oh Michael is going to be a sour bitch for a while isn’t he. Fuck. Well fuck you, man! He’s my sire! I have to deal with him more than you!”

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He found Fiona on his bed. For a moment, he thought she was lying on her side in a sexy position, curled up with her head buried in his pillow, waiting for him to come ravage her. But as he came closer, he found her trembling, and her sobs muffled by the pillow.

“Fiona?” He sat down on the bed next to her, and stroked her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

She lifted her head, revealing her ruined mascara. She was never the sort to wear a lot of make up, but what little she did wear was smeared all over her cheeks, and his pillow. Tears soaked both.

“Damien!” She threw herself at him, as much as she could while lying, and flattened her chest against his. She hid her face in his neck, and cried. And not a tender whimper, or a sad sob. She bawled, almost screaming as she cried directly into his ear.

He didn’t mind. Confused, but didn’t mind. He hugged her, twisting so he was sitting directly on the bed, and she was half on his lap, half pinned against his chest. With one hand holding her waist and back, the other held the back of her head, and he leaned in to press his cheek against the side of her head, against the almost spongy texture of her frizzy hair.

“What happened?” he asked, after a few minutes of her cries. The fancy, expensive apartments of Dolareido had a lot of sound insulation, but she was borderline screaming. Neighbors might notice.

“Azamel... she... she...” That was all she managed. Back to loud sobs and cries, and more than a few heavy sniffles. Some snot probably coated his shoulder, and he didn’t care.

So Azamel was dead. It was amazing she’d lasted as long as she had, considering what Jeremiah had done to her. After the failed ritual, Azamel had withered down to nothing in a matter of weeks, but somehow held on. Far as Damien knew, she’d been training Sándor to be her replacement, and acclimating him to the family. Fiona wasn’t the biggest fan of Sándor, because he was a pretty stoic guy, and preferred to be closed off. He was the father she now had to deal with, because the grandmother she used to live with died.

He sighed as he nodded, and stroked her head. He was tempted to say some platitudes, to offer some sort of condolences or sympathy. It wouldn’t have helped, and he sucked at them anyway. Fiona didn’t want meaningless words. She wanted Azamel. She wanted her grandma.

So he did the only thing he could. He hugged her close, and let her cry.

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~~Antoinette~~

She stood in her tower, in the highest office, her grand office, and stared out the window.

‘He’s disappeared.’ That was what Daniel had told her over the phone an hour ago. The man had been watching Jack, to perhaps interfere if the curse overstepped itself. And if need be, to remove Jack from the situation, deem him effectively dead, and remove him from the Invictus. He would no longer be allowed to help the covenants. A way to spare his life, to keep him for herself, while also satisfying whichever covenant succeeded in nearly killing him.

She snarled as she waited, grinding her teeth in a way most unbecoming. This had not been part of the plan. If the curse was released during Jack’s encounter with Michael and Garry, Daniel would interfere. But while the Mekhet had looked for an opportunity to stop the Ripper, Jack and the two Gangrels disappeared. Which could only be the work of the Begotten. And since the Prince had no way to penetrate their realm of dreams, she was forced to wait until either Jack or the two Primogen found a way out of the maze of nightmares, or the Begotten released them.

If Azamel so much as—

Her laptop beeped. She turned and glared at it, ready to smash the thing to pieces. But self control won over, and she stepped over to examine the screen. A report from one of her thralls.

~Invictus and Carthians are both calling a truce.~

Well now, that was good news. If another building went up in flames, she would have been forced to pay a visit to the two infidels personally. Better news in that it likely meant Jack was alive, and had succeeded in his plot.

Then where was he?

It was another thirty minutes of agony before another report came in. Jack had been found, not far from where he had disappeared. Naturally, Antoinette sent a driver his way, and soon the boy was being escorted to her tower.

Not long after, the boy stepped into her office.

“Jack, you... look terrible.” Normally she would have sat in her chair and offered him a seat in one of the visitor chairs. But she walked over to him, and set a hand on his shoulder as she looked him up and down.

He managed a weak smile, and nodded. Terrible was an understatement. His suit was in tatters. His left hand was missing. Chunks of his body looked dented and warped. His head missed a portion of skin and hair. He must have been in agony. And yet he did not show it.

“Azamel’s dead. Or... will be, before the night is over.”

Oh dear. Antoinette sighed, and took Jack’s remaining hand. The office would not do for this conversation.

Jack said nothing as she took him back to the elevator he had just exited. He tried to look at her, to smile, but his eyes fell, and a heavy weight pulled on his expression. And as the elevator took them down and down into the quiet safety of her Elysium Tower’s underbelly, he squeezed her hand.

She guided him to Ashley and Julee. Both girls were studying, each sitting on a couch while classical musical played in the background. They preferred EDM or dubstep, musical ‘genres’ crass enough to make Antoinette’s skin crawl. But studying while listening to classical music was a proven methodology, and she insisted.

But they would soon be asleep, as Jack needed blood.

“My pets, if you please,” she said, gesturing to Jack as she stepped into the quiet room of black marble and soft couches.

Jack did not so much as say a word. Normally he would insist he did not need their blood, that he could hunt on his own, or use Veronica. He had likely drained Veronica tonight to prepare for his bout with the two Gangrels, but that was not the reason he did not fight her on this. The poor boy looked drained, emotionally and physically.

Her two precious ghouls hopped up, and their smiles vanished. They stared at Jack, at his destroyed suit and broken body, and his missing hand. They both gulped, and walked to him, the invisible weight the boy carried dragging the two girls down with him through sheer proximity.

He took of both of them. No word, no fuss, and no attempt to treat the girls with a teasing hand or seductive Kiss. He simply drained them, quickly and efficiently.

Antoinette watched her lover as his wounds began to heal. The hand would take time to regrow, though considering the ludicrous amount of power the curse had, it would take merely a single night. The other wounds, the missing skin, the dented and broken flesh, wounds that left bits of his insides exposed, it healed over at such a rate she could see it with her naked eye. A terrible, and terrifying power.

Antoinette set both girls down on the couches, and made sure they were set in comfortable positions, before she turned to Jack once again, and subtly reached out. He did not even look at her as he took her hand, and held it as they walked to her bedchamber. Their bedchamber.

He sat at the foot of the bed, and she joined him, the colossal room and enormous bed suddenly seeming quite empty and sad, as if to match his mood.

“You succeeded with Mister McDonald and Mister Tones?”

“Yeah.”

“You had to fight them, I assume.”

“Yeah.”

“And... the curse was involved.”

He nodded. “Didn’t break the Masquerade, but it got close.”

“I am sorry to say it, but I cannot deny that the curse is a forced to be reckoned with, if it was able to defeat Michael and Garry in combat. Did they defeat each other first?”

“No. I mean, they hurt each other, but... yeah, it was mostly the curse.” His shoulders slumped, and the poor boy’s hand fidgeted with the blanket. “Another thousand rats died because of me.”

She nodded, and cast her eyes toward the door of the chamber. There was an art to listening. If someone was looking down and away while sitting next to you as they spoke, it was sometimes the correct thing to look to the distance, adopting the ‘thinking gaze’. It was not a deception, either.

“It is a terrible shame that such horrible things happen through you.” She waited for his response. There was none. She would have to coax more information out of him. “What happened after? Daniel reports you disappeared.”

“The fight was getting out of hand until Azamel showed up and... opened a portal right on top of us, into one of her nightmare rooms. Not sure how she did it. Someone turned off the light in the basement. Probably Mark. Turned it back on, and we were in the dream world.”

Ah. Azamel was far too powerful for her own good. Though if Jack’s words rang true, the old woman was dead, and no longer a thorn in Antoinette’s side.

How callous. Clearly there was more to Azamel than Antoinette knew, considering how devoted her friends, her family were to her. And, considering Jack’s reaction.

“Why did she do such a thing?”

“Two reasons, I guess. She wanted Garry and Michael to start a truce, so... so when she was gone, the war would be over. She was worried if the Ripper killed them, it’d create a power vacuum, you know? Vampires killing each other, burning down buildings... everything that’s been happening, just worse.”

“Azamel is wise, and old. She has likely seen such destruction before. The other reason?”

He sighed, looking down, hands between his legs and resting against the bed’s edge. “She wanted to help me. And... you should have seen her, Antoinette. She was dying.”

“I am sorry, my love, but you saw her only days prior. You—”

“No, she was merged with her Horror thing, you know? She was this giant monster creature, and she... she could barely sit up. And I was talking to her, and she was dying right in front of me. I was... christ, I was talking to her, and she was nice to me.”

“Nice?”

“Nice, in a way I’d never seen. Fiona said Azamel was nice to her, but all I ever knew was this bitch old woman.”

“You are not alone in that, my love.”

“But she... she was nice to me. She could have lived longer, you know? It wasn't easy for her to do what she did, to yank me and Garry and Michael into the nightmare, opening a door right on top of us. She even flipped a building. It took a lot out of her. A lot lot out of her, and then she beat me, and—”

“She beat you?”

“Defeated me. Got her hands on me and squashed me.” He gestured to himself. “Half of this is from her.”

“Oh my. And the Gangrels?”

“The Ripper beat them. But they were recovering while Azamel had me pinned, and she caught them. They wanted her to kill me, because of the curse, but she said no, caught them, and forced them to agree to a truce.”

Azamel was a better negotiator than Antoinette realized. And why would she not be a great negotiator? The old woman ran a city once, many years ago. To be a talented negotiator would have been a requirement, to at least some degree.

After a few moments of silence, Jack leaned against her, and set his head against her shoulder.

“She could have killed me, Antoinette. That would have been an easy way to get Garry and Michael on her side. They wanted... want me dead, for tricking them, for abusing—” He jumped to his feet and threw his arms up. “Oh shit! I told them. Ripper told them.”

“Told them?”

“About the ritual or whatever being done in Dolareido. They know something's up now.”

Antoinette sighed and nodded. “That is unfortunate. The more that know, the more difficult it is for us to hide our actions. But Garry and Michael are not capable of only animalistic gestures and loud noises, my love. They are elders, and can be intelligent, and even reserved, when it suits their needs.”

Jack did not look convinced. Considering the Hell he had just gone through, all to deal with Garry and Michael's infuriating, infantile grudge, she did not blame him. But the poor boy did not understand. Kindred did not deal with slights as humans did. Humans abandoned their grudges as they aged, or they were destroyed by them. Vampires were immortal, and struggled to change. To spend a hundred years living a single mile from someone you blamed for losing someone precious to you? Such resentment in such proximity eventually boiled over.

Slowly, he sat beside her again, and she slipped an arm over his shoulders.

“I will speak to them, to ensure they understand what ails my city, and what they must do.”

“Yeah... yeah ok. Michael and I are going to unstage Amanda tomorrow night, and see if we can figure out what happened. I’m pretty sure she lied to Michael about something, to convince him to use her to trigger this war.”

“Is that what happened?”

“Yeah. Something’s going on. Me and Damien are gonna find out. Do... do you think Daniel could do that Auspex thing I hear about? Sorta... learn about her, and her secrets?”

Antoinette tapped a finger against her chin. “If necessary. Daniel spends his nights... hunting. But if this is being done tomorrow night, then you may summon him.”

Auspex was a terribly tricky and fickle ability. It did not turn secrets into an encyclopedia to be read. Antoinette did not trust what information it gleamed, but that did not mean something of value could not be learned. With Daniel hunting for more information about Black Blood, and skirting the edges of its awareness, his time was valuable. And yet, if they could learn something from Amanda that suggested Black Blood was involved, that would be useful information indeed.

She ran her fingers over Jack’s head, against the grain of his buzzed hair, and the boy relaxed into her touch.

“This is a victory,” she whispered. “No more do two of my Primogen kill each other’s Kindred. No more do they burn my city. And while they have learned of the dark presence earlier than I planned, I had planned to tell them eventually. They had to know, my love.”

“I guess.”

“And if Black Blood is involved in Amanda’s supposed lie, then there is something to learn. You may have discovered the perfect opportunity to uncover this plot.”

Jack looked up at her, eyebrow raised. She chuckled, and rubbed his head more. There was no chance Amanda would be carrying a secret detail in her mind that would be the key to ending the ritual. Kindred, and likely other paranormal entities like Black Blood knew particular vampires, like Daniel, were capable of uncovering secrets from the darkness of people’s minds, and even experiences. They were careful.

A game of shadows. Kindred played them well, but whatever dark art Black Blood pursued, it must have done so for many years now, decades. Centuries? She had to be very careful. A private conversation with Mister Tones and Mister McDonald was in order.

Jack looked back down, and silence fell on them once more. The poor boy was often forward with her about his ailments, now that their relationship had progressed so. Not tonight, evidently. Perhaps a little more prodding, to see if he wanted to speak of it, but needed to be coaxed yet again.

“Something else is on your mind, my love.”

He sighed as he nodded, and nudged his temple into her shoulder. “Yeah.”

“Do you wish to speak of it?”

“I don’t know. It’s... weird.”

“By all means, if you wish to hold it in...”

“It’s not that. It’s...” He turned his head enough his forehead pressed to her shoulder. “Azamel. I... I offered to stay with her, until the end.”

“Yes, I imagine you did.”

“She said no. Basically kicked me out.”

“And this bothers you?”

“It... It’s not what she did that bothers me. It’s why. She was protecting me, I think. From me.”

“Protecting you?” she asked.

“Yeah. She said some things, kinda told me I need to get over myself. That I can’t fix everything. And I noticed something she was implying. That I... I guess I seek out shit to get wrecked over. That I’m a glutton for punishment. That I’m making myself miserable.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yeah, fuck me, right? Do I have a case of martyrdom, or something? A masochist? Do I throw myself into situations where I have to... have to carry a burden?”

She mirrored his sigh, and stroked his head more. “I would be lying if I said you did not drift toward such situations.”

His sigh turned into a groan. “Azamel thinks if I keep it up, I’ll grow up to be a bitter, cynical old man.”

Antoinette chuckled, a tender and motherly sound. “Jack, you are already a bitter, cynical old man.”

“Hey.”

“But there is also a deep need in you to help others. For some reason, there is a spark inside you that craves not pain, but to block others from pain. Do not think yourself a masochist. You are, however, doomed to an eternity of throwing yourself between others and the pain that would befall them, even when it would be a poor decision. Even if nothing would come of it, except for more pain.”

“That... does sound like me, yeah. I wanted to be there for Azamel when she died. Didn't even fucking cross my mind that it'd be dumb to do that, that I'd be just throwing more weight on my shoulders. Azamel said she's known people like me before, and she was insistent I go. Said Mark would get Athalia and Fiona, and that she didn't need me.” He rubbed his forehead side to side against her shoulder. “Ugh, why am I like this?”

“You are not always like this. But when those you consider worth protecting are in pain, it is a reflex that takes over. Like Azamel, I have known people like you. But not Kindred.”

“Not all Kindred are selfish assholes. What about you?”

“You know very well my desires for a change in our nature, and in the methodology of our kind's pursuits, is also a selfish desire. I am intelligent. I am wise. But I am no saint, little Ventrue. I am afraid you and you alone of the two of us, are burdened with such a horrible curse.”

He chuckled, but kept his head where it was. “That why I love you?”

“Partly.”

“Other part?”

“I am a buxom creature, and beautiful beyond words.”

He chuckled again. Good. It hurt terribly to see her little Ventrue suffer, especially when victory was had, and the pain should have been left behind. But Jack was Jack, and he picked up the pain and added it to the anchor wrapped around his throat without hesitation.

“I—” His phone rang. Connected to a private network, just for him, without fear of her monitoring his messages, or him monitoring hers. The joys of working for two different covenants. “That's Damien.”

“By all means.” She released his head.

He checked his phone, and what little joy she had kindled in his expression vanished, ripped away by the inevitable.

“Azamel's dead. Fiona's crying in his arms right now. She... she died not long after I left.”

Antoinette slowly nodded as she set a gentle hand on the boy's. "Were Athalia and Fiona with her?"

"Yeah. They got to say their goodbyes, according to Damien."

"Then I am sure she died content, my love. As content as a frustrating old woman like Azamel can be."

Jack managed a slow nod, but no smile followed. "Yeah. I... I think she did."

Antoinette gently took the phone, and set it on the bed. With a tender smile, she reached out, and guided the boy to lie down, until his head rested upon her lap, his legs on the bed. There, she rested a hand on his stomach while her other caressed his head.

"I know you are in pain. I know you connected with Azamel in a way I did not. I know her death could have been avoided, if you, or any of us, managed to defeat Jeremiah before he enacted his ritual. I know the death of your sister, and Julias, at the hands of Angela eats away at you each and every night." Her caressing hand gently slid over his face, and closed his eyes, before she returned to his buzzed hair. His eyes stayed closed. "But understand that not only are you not to blame for any of these horrible things, you also managed to pull victory from these dire situations. You have done better than most would. Take solace in that knowledge, that more people would be dead or hurt, if not for your efforts."

A tiny smile broke through his morose expression, eyes still closed. "Yeah?"

"Our second lives can be cruel, horrible affairs, but you and I both strive to make them better for ourselves and the people in them. It is one of the many reasons I love you."

Jack's small but powerful smile remained, and he nodded as he relaxed against her lap.

Antoinette pet his head, and pulled out her own phone with her offhand. "I must send Daniel a message."

"Something secret?"

"Non."

"Oh... about Azamel."

"Oui. I believe my old friend will want to visit Athalia."

"Athalia? Really? Figured she'd want to be alone, and brood and stuff. Azamel's death will hit her the hardest."

“Athalia will indeed want to brood and withdraw into herself. But there is more to her than a cold woman, made of ice. She will not realize it at first, I imagine. There will be some resistance from her. But Daniel will — due to my guidance — melt her cold shell and... I am sorry, I am speaking of deeply personal matters of my good friend.”

“You need more girl friends to talk about this stuff with.”

“I have Ashley and Julee, and Elaine.” She grinned down at Jack, and poked his nose, causing his eyes to open. “And I have your mother.”

“Oh god. You don’t talk to her about sex stuff about me, do you?”

“I do not say your name, if that is what you mean.”

He stared at her, eyes widening. “But she can figure out who you’re talking about?”

“Most likely.”

“Oh god.”

“If it is any consolation, your mother is happy that you are a talented, giving lover.”

“Oh god.”

They chuckled, but after a few moments, the weight returned to Jack’s face. He closed his eyes again, and she stroked his hair, as the boy no doubt turned a thousand possibilities through his mind, looking for a way he could have done better. A compulsion he had little control over.

So she did what she could. She caressed his scalp, and did her best to soothe his pain. She was intelligent. She was wise. But from the outside, she could only help so much. It was her curse, to watch the man she loved tear himself to pieces.

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~~Jack~~

The next night, he woke up to a regrown hand. Hard to say exactly how that worked, what happened during the day while he slept and whatnot. No vampire would feel comfortable being filmed while sleeping, either.

His aches and pains were gone, too. He sat up, rotated his shoulders, twisted his wrist, flexed his fingers — both hands — and wiggled his toes. All in working order.

More than that. Realization came like a rush, and he looked down at the blankets. The war was over. Azamel was dead, but the war was over, and she helped. He told the Begotten to stay out of it, but Azamel helped him in the end.

Figures. The first time she did something truly compassionate for him, for vampires, and it was with her last breath. Christ, that fucking sucked.

Don't be sad. You won, Jack. Sorta. Now he had a massive amount of clean up to do. He had to deal with Michael, and their relationship was probably worse now. But hey, if he got through to Garry and Michael, and he thought he did, then maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Either way, worth it to get people to stop killing each other.

He looked down beside him at Antoinette. She smiled up at him, head still on her pillow, but she said nothing.

“I gotta get ready for that thing with Michael and Amanda. Then there's an Invictus meeting after, and I'll be going to that too.”

“I see.”

“I'll tell you if we learn anything, from Amanda. Should I involve Michael?”

“You have little choice in that matter anymore.”

“I guess. I'll, uh, try and be reasonable with what I tell him.”

“Indeed. Avoid telling him more than he needs to know. Unfortunately, that means exposing that Black Blood is suspect, and possibly Jacob.”

“Damn. I'll try and be discrete.”

She reached up from under the blankets, pushing them down enough to free her arm, and she rubbed his back. After a few moments, she used her nails, and scratched his back, sending pleasant chills up and down his body.

“It is the first night I do not need thralls scouting the city for potential Masquerade violations in many months. The first night in some time, I do not have to split my sheriff's time between hunting for more of Black Blood's acts, and worrying about what chaos the Carthians and Invictus might cause. All thanks to you.”

He grinned down at her. He recognized that tone in her voice, and the devious smile. She was purposefully stroking his ego.

He slipped back under the covers, cuddled into her side, and buried his face in her closer breast. Soft, heavy, supple, the huge pillow was ridiculously comfortable, and ridiculously massive. He never wanted to leave.

Antoinette bent her arm, its bicep under his head and neck, and rubbed his hair as she helpfully pressed him into her breast. They weren't going to have sex. He had shit to do. But it was nice to spend ten minutes just cuddling with his lover.

It almost felt anticlimactic. The war was over, kinda. A truce. He didn't need to worry about shit anymore. Mostly. He didn't need to worry about getting sniped, or getting set on fire. He didn't need to go on patrols. He didn't need to deal with that fucker Jeremy Long. Now, he could focus on the much bigger issue.

He needed to talk to his mom. A weird as fuck thought to have, when burying his face in his super tall girlfriend's super massive boob. But, the way Azamel spent her last bits of energy, or life, helping him and his problems? Couldn't help but make him think of a mom. Azamel had never seemed like a mother to him, despite Fiona's insistence that she was, or a grandmother. At least until last night.

Mental note: make time for your mother, you idiot.

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He took a slow, useless breath, and opened the door.

Michael waited in his office, seated at the large table, dressed in a nice suit, but looking beat up. He didn't show it, but Jack could see some cuts on his neck and hands that weren't fully healed. They were a million times worse last night, but there were still wounds that Jack's curse would have healed over night if he had them.

Michael realized it, too. He looked at Jack, looked at his exposed head, neck, and hands, and the fact he had both hands back. A solid poker face, but Jack could see the man was annoyed Jack had fully recovered already. Which would make the following conversation even more annoying, with Jack having to navigate the man's ego.

“Mister Terry,” he said. Ok, titles, that was good, kinda. “I see your curse has healed you.” Wow, he even approached the topic directly. Strange.

“It’s powerful. Too powerful.”

“Agreed. I also spoke to Maria last night, after our encounter.”

“Oh?” Uh oh.

“She admitted to telling you about Roland.”

Jack forced down the desire to wince, and kept his gaze on Michael. “Did she?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m not trying to get you to out her. She told you, and you decided to take matters into your own hands. You somehow arranged a trail of evidence that led to both Mister Tones and I believing that you were going to interfere with our... strange competition.”

“I—”

“You decided the only way to have Garry and I talk and sort out our differences, was to have us butt heads with you in the middle. A free-for-all, fists flying.” The man frowned. Jack didn’t say anything this time. Michael wanted his monologue, so he let him monologue. “And there was some wisdom in that. Garry and I have been dancing around this issue for decades, and we never speak of it. It’s private, personal, and it’s been slowly growing more and more painful over the years. It was... a rather cold slap of reality, to know that it’s blinded us to larger problems. And”—he pointed a finger at Jack, hand still on the table—“you will tell me about this larger problem, in greater detail, correct?”

Jack nodded. “Yes sir.” Don’t smile don’t smile.

“Understand that the Carthians fight the Invictus and Lancea et Sanctum in most cities with a Kindred society, Mister Terry. My issues with Garry are hardly the reason for such an aged and widespread conflict. But Maria has helped me see that you touched a grain of truth with your accusations.” The man sighed as he leaned back in his chair. “I do not know how long this truce will last. But for now, Mister Tones and I will instruct our covenants to leave each other be.”

“Thank you.”

“And I am fining you a million dollars, for your transgression against me. You will donate the money to the Xnomina corporation.”

A million fucking dollars. Holy shit. Jack didn’t have that in cash, but he had it in assets, stocks, all that shit. Not a big slap for someone like Antoinette, but for someone like Jack, the only reason he could even afford it was because of all the shit he inherited from Julias, what the Invictus didn’t take.

“Yes sir.” No point in arguing with him about it. Better this than making a big spectacle, and possibly another fight.

“You crossed a line doing what you did, Mister Terry. You disrespected me. But I know you did it because you wanted to save Kindred lives, and because the city faces a potentially larger threat. Those are the only reasons I do not have you killed.” And the death threat, of course.

“It had to be done.” Jack held a solid, cold face. He couldn’t get too subservient now, or Michael might try and undermine him somehow.

Michael frowned harder. “I suppose it did.” Nodding, he stood up and gestured to the door. “Now that that’s out of the way, let’s go awaken Miss Pol.”

Jack mirrored the nod, and followed after Michael. Damien waited in the hall, and a small trade of smiles was enough to let him know things went well. The three of them got into the elevator, and no one said a word as they went down and down. This was awkward enough, and you didn’t chitchat with your boss around, especially not a mob boss.

They came out on the bottom floor, one floor below where they kept the armaments. Down here, it wasn’t like the Elysium Tower’s basement, which was a maze of halls that connected to a myriad of strange rooms of many sizes. Listening rooms, changing rooms, wreck rooms, electronic rooms, a pool, and then higher, the experiment rooms Jack wasn’t allowed to see. But in Xnomina, it was all business. Sure it was sleek and pristine upstairs, but the basement was all metal, like some sort of military storage facility; basically what it was, considering the weapons it stored.

Michael took them down one of the halls to one of the storage rooms. You couldn’t access a storage room without permission, and to get permission you needed to go through Xnomina. Unless you were Michael. He plucked a keycard out of his pocket, waved it in front of the scanner, and the big metal door went beep boop, and unlocked with a loud click.

Inside was a bunch of empty metal shelves in an otherwise empty room, some LED strip lights above, and a dark tile floor, beneath which was probably more metal. Invictus didn’t fuck around protecting their shit.

In the center of the room, sitting in a metal chair, was Amanda, a stake in her heart. A somewhat short black woman, with thin long black hair, and a soft, kind face, even when in torpor. She had a little more bite to her than her face suggested though, kinda like her sire Gloria. Mekhet did love to be sneaky.

Damien approached first. He squatted down in front of her, and looked her up and down. Dressed in a typical business suit, skirt and all, she looked perfectly normal.

“Should I wait for you to read her first?” Michael asked.

“No. I might need her awake to help.”

The Gangrel nodded, and yanked the stake out of her heart with zero gentleness.

It took a few moments. Mekhet weren't exactly fast healers, and Amanda was only as old as Jack. But eventually her eyes shot open, and she sat up straight with a jolt as the hole in her chest sealed. A poor seal, just enough skin and flesh to keep her functioning.

The three men waited. Waking up from a stake in the heart was not fun, like waking up from daily torpor except with an even a harsher rush of awareness, and a whole bunch of pain. It was probably her first time getting staked, too. Combined with waking up in a storage room with three dudes staring at her, she was considerably freaked.

“Wh-What's happening!?! What's going on? I... oh... Mister McDonald?” She blinked at him, the stake in his hand, and then Damien and Jack. “Ja—Mister Terry? Mister Burksen?”

“Miss Pol,” Michael said. “How are you?”

“I... I'm in pain.” She clutched her chest, and after looking down at it under her palm, blinked several times at the hole in her suit. “I was staked?”

Michael gestured to the stake in his hand. “Take a moment to remember what happened. It was the night of the fire at Xnomina HQ, when the Carthians attacked.”

“Fire? Fire... I... what?”

Jack put up a finger. “As much as a building of marble and metal can burn. But yeah, we lost a lot of furniture and paintings and fake plants.” Which were replaced, of course. The Invictus would never let the Xnomina HQ look bad for any longer than a couple days.

“I see. Then... w-why am I here?” She looked around at the storage room, more confused than Jack figured she'd be. “Xnomina storage?”

“Yes,” Damien said. “You don't remember?”

“I remember... I remember...” She blinked at them for the hundredth time before closing her eyes and clutching her head. “I don't remember. I remember the fire, but... I don't remember any details. I don't... remember anything for the past few days. Or, few days since I was, um, staked.”

Of course she didn't, cause if she did, she'd be able to answer questions.

Damien stood up, and set a hand on Amanda's shoulder. "I'm going to try and open your mind."

"I don't—"

He shook his head. "Auspex. You'll learn it eventually. Whatever Gloria is willing to share with you."

Ah, the joys of being Kindred. Secrets everywhere. No one told each other a damn thing, Mekhet especially. How did Auspex work? Only the Mekhet knew, and even they kept its more powerful abilities hidden from each other. Good chance that Gloria didn't know shit about the crazy things Auspex could do, while Daniel knew a lot. Would Gloria ever learn them? Maybe. Hard to use a crazy ability unless someone came along and taught you how, especially Auspex.

Amanda nodded, gulped, and waited, eyes wide. She was scared.

Damien smiled at her. A comforting smile, subtle but there, and a much bigger smile than Jack was used to seeing on the dude's face. He'd changed.

Whatever Damien did, or was doing, it didn't have any outer expression. Like a lot of Kindred Disciplines, it was something that affected someone else's mind in some way or another. A human watching wouldn't see anything. But everyone in the room could feel something change. Damien pulled up his vitae, like flexing a muscle and lifting a heavy weight, and pushed it out to touch Amanda's mind.

And then he stood there for five minutes with a strange look on his face, like he'd tasted something sour and wasn't sure if to like it or not. Jack watched, eyebrow raised, and glanced between all three vampires. Michael didn't show any expression. Amanda waited like someone was going to pinch her, but it never came. And Damien continued to stand there, sour expression slowly growing worse.

"I can't..." His frown turned into a wince as he concentrated, and pressed a couple fingers against his left temple like he had a headache. Vampires didn't get headaches. "I can't get through."

"That's fine," Jack said. "We can ask the sheriff. Prince says he should be able to help, considering how important this is."

"Important?" Amanda asked. "The sheriff? Um, I... w-what's going on?"

Michael raised a hand slightly, palm forward. "Amanda Pol, it seems you've been tricked into doing something... problematic. I will reveal more details to you in the future, but know that you are to

not speak of this conversation to anyone until I say otherwise. This is important. Lives depend on you.”  
Way to lay it on thick.

Poor Amanda. Her eyes widened to freakish levels. If she’d been human, she’d have been having a panic attack.

“I don’t know if the sheriff will have any better luck.” Damien stepped back and paced from shelf to shelf as he looked down. Good to see Jack wasn’t the only person who did that. “I can reach into the memories, try and remember things from before a few days of the attack, but then I get blocked.”

“You mean you succeeded at, um, doing the mind thing?”

Damien nodded to him. “Barely, but, yes.”

That, was damn impressive for a Mekhet his age.

“I get blocked every time I use Dominate,” Jack said. “I have to punch my way through. Maybe it’s like that?”

“This is different. This is... like... I don’t know, it just blocks me. I don’t know. I don’t know if the sheriff will be able to do anything either. I am barely able to use this ability, advanced as it is, and I’m sure Daniel is a thousand times better at it than me. But trying to... find the memories, all I find is something stopping me. Like trying to trudge through a deep swamp. Cold, dark, and full of death.”

Amanda almost stood up, but Jack met her eyes and shook his head. Just sit tight and don’t move or ask any questions, Amanda, and you’ll be fine.

“That’s... so scary,” she said, brought up both hands to her face, and hid her face in her palms. Slowly, she lowered her hands, and blinked at one of them. “Um, did someone put a ring on my finger?”

The three men all turned to look at her hand. Yeah, she was wearing a single ring, a tiny black band.

“That’s not yours?” Jack asked.

“No. It’s pretty ugly. A black ring? And it looks old, worn and warped and—”

Damien grabbed her hand before she pulled it off. “Don’t touch it.”

“Uh, I kinda already am.”

“Don’t remove it. Let me see if I can gleam something from it.” Eyes locked on the ring, Damien held Amanda’s hand in one of his, and touched the ring with the other.

Same thing. He stood there for a good five minutes, face sour, but otherwise the room was silent. Vampires didn't breathe or fidget much, so even with four people in the storage room, it was just as quiet as before the vampires came in.

Slowly, Damien pulled the ring off her finger. Amanda winced as he did, Jack did too, half expecting it to explode, or for Amanda to drop dead. Deader. But the ring came off without issue, and Damien held it in front of him as he glared at it.

"I see... the same thing. A cold, dark swamp, filled with dead things."

"Fuck," Jack said. "Not useful?"

"I see a black skeleton, huge, and its... doing something to the ring. There's a... cauldron, and it's dropping the ring into it. And then... a street. Dolareido maybe. People... drifting... and the ring's in the crowd somewhere. And then it's on... a corpse's finger. The corpse is on fire."

Amanda almost stood up, again. "Corpse? Fire!?"

Damien lowered the ring, and rubbed both temples with finger and thumb. Jack knew that look. The man was drained.

"I assume metaphor," Damien said. "A corpse can be a vampire. The fire could be metaphor for inciting something."

"Or not," Michael said.

"Or not. The corpse could be the lie that you were told about the kine death, Mister McDonald, and the fire could be the fires the Carthians were spreading. There's no way to be certain."

Damien had told Jack about Auspex before, about how problematic it was to try and learn anything with it. It could be wrong. It could even give you one of those self fulfilling nasty prophecy visions, where it tells you exactly what to do to avoid death, and you end up dying because of it.

"Either way," Jack said. "I think we know where this ring came from."

Michael raised a brow but said nothing. Of course he didn't want to admit ignorance in front of Amanda, but a quick glare from the man told Jack enough. He was going to make Jack tell him everything.

"Should we ask the sheriff to take a look at her?" Damien asked.

"Yeah, but if you think he'll run into the same barrier, it can wait until he's free."



“Miss Pol,” Michael said, “I say again, speak of this to no one. If Miss Jennings or anyone else asks, tell them you were involved in private Invictus business about the war.”

She nodded again, but her eyes were locked on the ring. It would be freaky to wake up from torpor, have several days of your life missing from memory, and find a random ring on your finger.

“Now,” Michael continued, “some things happened while you were unconscious. Let me explain.”

Explain he did. He told her about what Amanda told him during the Xnomina attack, about what they did, him staking her, the following war, and the people who died. Poor Amanda. Every thing Michael said made her sink further into her chair, until she couldn't look him in the face anymore.

“Oh my god.”

“It wasn't your fault,” Jack said, and he spared a quick glance to Michael, complete with a hint of anger. Michael returned it. Yeah, their relationship was going to suck now.

“Take your time recovering, Miss Pol,” Michael said, “and don't be surprised if Mister Terry, Mister Burksen, or indeed, the sheriff, come to you again to ask questions or dive deep into your mind. Obey their requests, and you will be compensated. Don't, and it will not end well.” He leaned down toward her, and eyed her. Classic mob boss eye, the sort that told her it was an offer she couldn't refuse.

She took it, hook line and sinker, nodding like her life depended on it. Michael was a jackass.

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Michael sat down in the main office where they had their meetings, a big long table with lots of chairs, and a touch screen on the wall, similar to the top office where the triumvirate held their meetings. It wouldn't be long before the other Invictus seniors showed up, and they'd have do a debriefing of the damage, and the truce. But there was enough time for the big conversation.

“As far as I know,” Michael said, gesturing to two chairs across the table from him, “Mister Tones has gone to Avery to learn about this. I'm going to learn it from you two. I assume Burksen knows as much as you, Terry, since you seem to tell each other everything.”

If they told him Jessy knew, how would he react? Not good, definitely not good.

“He does,” Jack said. “The Begotten were the first to tell us about it. He's close with Fiona.”

“I see. Azamel told you, then?”

“Yes, about two years ago.”

“Two years. Impressive that you kept it secret for this long.”

Jack nodded as politely as he could. “Yes sir.”

“And the dragons know.”

“Yes.”

“So then. Explain.”

Jack and Damien glanced at each other, and Damien nodded to him. Well, fine, he'll do the talking. How did he get this ambassador job?

Jack told him quite a bit. He told Michael about Black Blood, though Michael knew of the spirit's existence, but only barely. He told Michael about the strange tears showing up, and how it seemed to be the markings of a ritual symbol they were pretty convinced was not good. Like, might destroy the city, or even the world bad.

Michael took the threat to the city seriously, but he wasn't convinced about the threat to the world. Fine, whatever, taking the first threat seriously was good enough.

“So Jacob is our enemy? I know he conspires with the spirit.”

“We don't know,” Jack said. “Maybe? We've seen nothing to prove he is.”

“Bold of the Prince to continue letting her childe maintain her romantic involvement with him.”

Yeah, Prince's childe, not his mom or anything like that.

“She doesn't know.”

Michael raised a brow. “Mister Terry, are you telling me you're letting your mother risk her neck? You?” Oh now she was his mom.

Jack didn't bother hiding his scowl. “Yes. This is important. We don't know if Jacob is working with Black Blood, but there's a chance, and in either circumstance it's better we don't tell her. We don't want Black Blood knowing how much we've uncovered.”

“An intelligent and tactical decision. I assume this was the Prince's plan, and not yours?”

“... yes.” Oh this guy, this fucking guy.

Michael must have seen the frustration in Jack's eyes, cause he chuckled as he kept his gaze.

“And Azamel is truly convinced these tears are a threat?”

“Was,” Damien said. “She died, not long after your encounter with her.”

Michael sighed as he leaned back in his chair again. “I cannot say that life won’t be easier without her, but she was worthy of respect. You don’t often run into women willing to use an iron fist.”

“True enough sir,” Jack said. “She was... banking on accomplishing some things in this city. That’s why she told us about the dark ritual being cast; we didn’t know that’s what it was at the time. She told us so we could put a stop to it, so Dolareido would be a good place for her goals. And for her family.”

“More sentimental than she seemed on the outside, wasn’t she?” And Michael threw him another eye, like Jack should know that about other people, too.

“Yes. I think we should trust what she told us. The Prince does, and the dragons have been working on this problem for a while.”

“Does this have anything to do with why Avery attacked Maria?”

“Yes. The werewolves followed a trail of evidence placed by spirits that led to her. We’re convinced Black Blood tricked them.”

Michael glanced up as he thought. “And... not long after that, Amanda came to me with an idea that would trigger the war Garry and I had been tiptoeing around for decades. An idea she has no memory of. And a mysterious ring has been found on her finger, that Damien’s Auspex revealed to be linked to something rather dark. Which means you think Black Blood has been creating distractions.”

Damn, he put things together pretty quick.

“Yes sir,” Jack said.

“You give this spirit a lot of credit.”

“We do,” Damien said. “And it’s earned it. Black Blood is a terrifying, brutally intelligent creature.”

Jack raised a finger slightly. “Problem is, it’s hard to tell anything with Black Blood. It isn’t malevolent, far as we can tell. It helped Sándor, when Jeremiah had us all bound in a strange ritual, the one that wounded Azamel.” The one you failed to stop. No, no don’t think like that. Stop accepting responsibility for everything. That last words of a dying woman, Jack. Stop beating yourself up. “Jacob and Black Blood saved me, Damien, and the others from Jeremiah and Sándor when he was still enslaved, when we were rescuing Jessy, Clara, and Eric. It’s a tricky situation. We have to be careful, and not let Jacob know what we’re up to.”

“Garry and Jacob are friends, of a sort,” Michael said. “You think Garry won’t speak to him of this?”

“Once Avery tells him the details? I hope not.”

Michael nodded as he sat back, and let his eyes drift off to nothing as he entered thinking mode. He came back after a minute, and hooked his fingers together as he set his hands on the table.

“Mister Terry. Your curse revealed some other, rather important secrets. Namely that you killed your grandsire Viktor Honors, Tony, and even Lucas, Damien’s sire. That deserves elucidation.”

Jack and Damien looked at each other. Tell him? Well, too late to not tell him.

So Jack told him. Told him about the fire, and then told him about how Jack was at the tower when Lucas attacked, and how Jack managed to turn the situation around. Surprisingly, Michael’s face didn’t get more angry at the explanation went on. If anything, he smiled.

“Impressive, Mister Terry. Thinking on your feet, and a pure display of will. And the curse did not help you dominate Mister Burksen’s mind?”

“No. Or, maybe it did, but at that time it was still... getting its claws into my mind, I guess.”

Michael grinned as he leaned back, and folded his arms across his chest. “Very impressive. Julias chose well.” He gestured to Damien. “As did I, and Lucas, and the sheriff. Our childer have all been Right Hands at one point or another for a reason.”

“You’re not angry?” Jack asked.

“I am angry at myself and my agents for not having discovered this sooner. I am... happy, to know that Mister Mire sired as well as he did. If I had known you’d already created so much chaos and change in Dolareido, Mister Terry, I would not have found your disrespect and disregard for the chain of command to be so insulting. All this time, I felt I was being usurped by an idiot child. You’ve earned recognition.”

“Um... thank you.”

The man’s grin turned a little more sinister than Jack liked.

“But make no mistake. This curse of yours is strong, but without it, you would have died last night.”

“Agreed, sir.”

“You’re not going to apologize for your behavior last night, are you, Mister Terry?”

“Probably not.”

“Ha. There’s a little more Viktor Honors in you than you might like to admit, Mister Terry. Ventrue, indeed.”