

~~Antoinette~~

“There they are,” Elaine whispered.

Antoinette nodded, and took the binoculars from her. High up upon the enormous cathedral, the two elders watched the city, the streets beneath, and now the fleeing werewolves.

“Twelve,” Antoinette said. “They all live.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am... torn. Avery does not deserve death, nor does her pack. But they are a thorn in my side.”

“From what I hear, they think they are going to save the city.”

Antoinette sighed and shook her head. “Perhaps. But they will make enemies of us all doing so.”

The werewolves looked horrendous. Whatever Jack had done to them, assuming it was Jack, he had spared them, but he had also broken them, thoroughly. As hundreds of rats flowed out of the cathedral, hidden in the night and disappearing into the black of Dolareido, the twelve werewolves dragged themselves back toward their homes. Most lived near the Carthians, but Clara and Carter did not. And yet, despite their homes being in the entertainment district, they went with the pack, with Avery.

They no longer felt safe near the Invictus. That thin thread was now broken.

“Perhaps Maria is the one who injured them?” Elaine said. “She is quite the deadly woman, after all.”

“Rats flee the cathedral, by the thousands.” She handed the binoculars back.

Elaine took them, and Antoinette watched a smile slowly spread on the woman’s lips.

“Impressive, to summon so many.”

“The curse is disgustingly powerful. And disgusting.”

Sighing, Elaine lowered the binoculars and met her eyes. “It was not all bad.”

“You remember such details?”

“I can remember... the thrill of it, of the power. I can remember the sense of purpose and rage it gave me. But I never broke it free of its bindings. I could never do that.” She gestured far down below, underneath the gargoyle they stood upon, down to the scurrying lines of black that flowed over the gutters.

A glint of something crossed Elaine's face. Envy, perhaps?

"You could do that now."

"Not without great effort." Sighing, she shook her head. "With the power of the curse unleashed, an elder vampire would be beyond formidable."

Antoinette watched her friend for a while, reading the expressions Elaine felt comfortable surfacing. To summon an army, a legion of rodents, was indeed an impressive feat for a Ventrue of any age, let alone one as young as Jack. However...

"It would not be worth it, old friend. You have not spoken with the curse unleashed. I have. It is abhorrent, disturbing, and twisted."

"Then, perhaps, my ignorance shall be alleviated tonight? The army of vermin, the fleeing werewolves, I surmise the curse shall step out of the cathedral any moment."

Sighing, Antoinette nodded. In all likelihood, Jack had unleashed the curse once again tonight, and she was terrified to learn the results. The werewolves left the cathedral alive, something she would not expect the curse to do, but then, maybe the curse had the forethought to consider ramifications. Maybe, instead of thinking of the curse as a compressed vortex of rage and sickening tastes, she should think of it as a malevolent villain, quite capable of intelligent decisions.

The thought was beyond putrid.

They waited another ten minutes, but nothing came of it. Jack did not step out from the cathedral, and there was no ignoring the dreadful aura that emanated from the building. He lurked within.

After a frustrated groan, Antoinette hopped down from the cathedral rooftops, and landed before its grand doors. Once Elaine joined her, they pushed them in, stepping over the blood of the werewolves, and walked into the church.

She did not enjoy the cathedral's presence. Not for lack of beauty; it was a marvelous structure. It had been built without her permission, Lucas testing the limits of his political power. But Lucas was gone, and the cathedral, forever a reminder of the fool and his delusions, was a testament to his failure. And Maria, the poor soul, was attached to it.

It was dark in the cathedral. Distant streetlights managed to penetrate the stained glass windows, but only just. The candles that usually dotted the nave and chancel were extinguished, and the towering organ looked monolithic in the darkness.

In the third row sat a young man, shirtless, with a dozen cuts on his skin, none deep. He sat leaning back, arms hooked over the back of the pew, his head looking to the crucifix that stood before the pulpit. On the pew in front of him sat two crows, perched upon its back, and turned to face their master.

The two birds looked to the approaching elders, and both let out annoyed caws as Antoinette and Elaine drew near.

“Jealous?” he asked.

Antoinette blinked, turned back to Elaine who only shrugged, before she looked back to Jack. “I am not sure I—”

“I was talking to Mulder and Scully, dumbass.”

Antoinette froze, five feet back from the pew Jack sat upon, and she clenched her hands until her nails threatened to pierce her palms. Again she glanced to Elaine, and found her friend’s eyes wide, locked onto Jack. The boy had proved Antoinette’s concern and disgust with his very first sentence.

“Maria and Damien are downstairs,” he said, “alive, but not looking too hot. Maria will be out of commission for a few weeks or more. Maybe months. Damien too. Avery really fucked them up.”

“And yet you did not kill them,” Antoinette said.

“Who, Avery? Nah. Coulda. Hell, I was tempted. But then I’d have this jackass screaming at me for the rest of eternity.” He pointed at his temple. “And burning bridges is never a good idea. Unless it’s a really big bridge that would burn spectacularly.”

The ambiguity on whether he meant a metaphorical bridge or not, did not sit well with her.

“Jack,” she said, “I—”

“Jack the Ripper.” He laughed again, reached out, and lightly scratched one crow behind the head, and then the other. “Everyone’s been thinking it. Might as well go with it.”

The Ripper. She grit her teeth and walked down the isle a little further, until she stood beside the pew her lover sat within. Of course, it was not her lover, but the curse that fought for control of his body. She would not dignify it with a name.

“Where is the necklace Elaine gave you?”

“Here.” He waved his right hand a little, before setting his arm along the back of the pew once more. “Still intact. Jack took it off when he saw shit was about to get hairy. Can’t fight a dozen

werewolves with his Beast being squashed. And in the fight, he let his guard down, so I came out to play.” The following laugh had her gritting her teeth.

“I see.” She stepped a little further down the isle, so she could look the curse in the eye. But her eyes fell to his chest instead, and she took a slow, deep breath.

She could see his rib cage. Four enormous claw marks cut from his neck down to his stomach, and each left lines of burned flesh and ash along the outside of the wounds. His ribs had been cut through, as had his abdominal muscles. Kindred blood slowly pulsed within the wound, keeping his innards inside, but wounds of that caliber, wounds that looked to be caused by blades of fire, would take an elder days, perhaps weeks to heal, no matter the amount of devoured blood.

“Avery got me pretty good.” He chuckled, gestured to his chest, and winked at her. “But I got her back.”

“You must be hungry,” Elaine said, joining Antoinette’s side. “Defeating a dozen werewolves and now recovering from those wounds will be draining.”

“Yeap. That reminds me, how’d it go with my new thrall?”

Antoinette could not keep a small frown from escaping. “Your taint does not poison her.” And she is not your thrall, demon.

“Ha! Shame. I was hoping it’d turn her into a super thrall or something.” He shrugged, and held out his hand sideways. One of the crows hopped onto his finger, and flapped its wings a few times, as Jack brought it in close.

“You were waiting for us,” Antoinette said.

“Jack sent you a message, right? Michael should be here soon, too. Probably with a bunch of ghouls and Kindred.” Shrugging again, he set the bird back on the pew in front of him. “I’ll be gone by then. Jack can handle the clean up.”

Antoinette nodded. “It is Invictus procedure, to deal with—”

“Not that clean up. I mean with Maria. She’ll... well, she’ll be out for blood.” He laughed, a twisted, corrupt sound, and Antoinette’s spine shivered as if a ghost dragged its nails across her bones. “Garry’s gonna be pretty happy. I figure he gave Avery the nudge to actually attack Maria. Mission successful, sorta. Maria won’t be defending shit for a little while, which means Garry’s gonna go on the offensive. And you know Michael’s gonna have Jack front and center dealing with it.”

Antoinette grit her teeth and looked to Elaine. Her friend stared at Jack, eyes occasionally drifting to the two crows, before she looked to Antoinette. The curse was correct. Garry and Michael had been pushing at each other's borders for months now, skirmishes, occasional gunfights, and far worse, economic warfare between Xnomina and Terra Den.

That was their prerogative. Antoinette enforced the Masquerade in her city, but if the Invictus and the Carthians decided to slaughter each other, that was not her concern. If they crossed a line and brought the attention of the kine, then it was. But she had no stake in either covenant, at least, not before she met Jack.

"And you," Jack said, and he snapped his head to look at Elaine. The sneer on his face turned Antoinette's stomach. "You might have abandoned the gift you were given, but a lot can happen in hundreds of years. I won't let you kill me, great grandsire. And I won't let you have me, either."

"Have you? I—"

Jack waved her off, like dismissing a child, and he looked past them to the crucifix beyond. "Christ, that fight drained me. Won't be long before Jack takes over again. And the meditation, this stupid necklace"—he waved the small thing in his right hand around—"it all works. Shuts me right up. Problem is, Jack isn't good enough to handle the shitshows coming his way, and he knows it. He'll rely on me again, like he relied on me tonight."

"He does not need you," Antoinette said.

"Yeah, he does. And if someone finally manages to remove me or kill me, someone's gonna kill him." Laughing again, he looked down at the necklace in his hand, and slipped it on around his neck. "Good luck."

His head lowered, and the boy drifted into torpor. Elaine and Antoinette exchanged glances once again, before looking to the birds. Mulder and Scully sat, and waited, and only when the boy raised his head once again did they caw a greeting.

The boy blinked at the two birds, then at Antoinette and Elaine, and then down at his chest.

"Holy shit this hurts." He clutched his arm over his chest and groaned. "Fucking fuck this hurts."

Sighing with relief, Antoinette sat down beside her love, and touched his shoulder. "Avery was a terror when she first visited the city, decades ago. Now she is a force to be reckoned with, I am sure."

“You’re telling me. I knew she could do some crazy shit, but sweet fucking...” He reached out for her shoulder and clutched it tight. “Can we get out of here? I need to get away from here, from Maria. Need a drink, and sleep.”

“Yes, of course. But why flee Maria? She owes you her life.”

He shook his head desperately, and forced himself to stand. The shifting crunch of his broken bones, held together only by his dark blood swirling within his chest cavity, looked excruciating. How had the curse held a conversation as if pain did not bother it? For an elder to ignore pain was easy. For a neonate, it was nothing of the sort.

“She... she knows.”

“Knows? I—”

“She knows, about Lucas.”

Antoinette frowned as she helped the boy out into the isle. Caws announced the two crows taking flight, and they found perches above to watch as Antoinette guided Jack out of the church.

Naturally, a dozen Kindred stood outside, Invictus, along with a dozen ghouls or thralls. Everyone was armed, swords, knives, shotguns, assault rifles, only weapons that could do damage to a werewolf. No Michael to be seen, though. Perhaps Damien had contacted him.

“Twenty three suits,” Elaine said with a grin. “But you are late. The werewolves are gone, and Maria and Damien need treatment. They await below.”

The vampires and ghouls looked at each other, and then to Jack. And waited.

“Sir?” one of the Kindred asked, stepping closer to the Invictus Right Hand.

Groaning and clutching his stomach, other arm wrapped over Antoinette’s shoulders, he gestured to the church nave behind them.

“Elaine’s right. Get in there and talk to Matthias. Get in a crew for clean up, and get Maria and Damien something to drink. They’re in worse shape than me.”

Several of the ghouls gulped at that.

“Yes sir.” Nodding, the crew rushed past.

As they did, two crows flew out through the open doors and perched upon a nearby gargoyle. Jack’s friends, and protective little creatures. Sometimes they joined her in her tower, and she had a feeling they would again tonight.

“Sir,” one of the Kindred said, and she stopped in front of them. “Do you want a drive back to your home, sir?”

“The apartment isn’t safe—oh, right, the mansion.” He groaned again and let his head drop.

“I think Mister Terry would prefer to stay with me this day,” Antoinette said, earning the nervous gaze of the young vampire.

“Y-Yeah.” Jack nodded, and managed a dismissing wave with his free hand. “Mister McDonald will get a proper report tomorrow night. In the mean time, notify him that the Carthians are going to be a problem.”

“Yes, Mister Terry.” She nodded, and followed the others into the cathedral as she pulled out her phone.

Maria knew where the mansion was, and if Jack spoke truly that she knew the boy was responsible for Lucas’s death, it was not entirely safe. If Jack slept within its depths in a secure room, it would be, but that did not mean the Nosferatu would not see the mansion burned atop him, and leave him a surprise gift upon awakening: explosives, and mountains of them.

Once the boy had the ghouls and thralls to defend his territory, he could play the game, but until then, he was vulnerable. The curse had a point.

But, the curse failed to understand something about people. Not everyone was cynical, and full of rage. Not everyone was bound to an endless cycle of destruction. The curse likely thought Maria would come for Jack, a slave to her emotions, and willing to sacrifice everything for them. But Antoinette knew better.

She would protect her love for the moment, in case she was wrong. But come tomorrow night, she would have a chat with Maria Turio, and see if her suspicions were true.

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~~Beatrice~~

“Holy shit,” she said.

“Holy shit indeed,” Jacob said.

The two of them sat on a nearby roof, low, and both pulled out their best Cloak of Night. Elaine and Antoinette were near, on the cathedral's roof, and if Triss and Jacob weren't careful, they'd be spotted. Jacob figured the sheriff wasn't around if those two were together, but even if that was true, those two were elders. Just cause they didn't have Auspex didn't mean they couldn't spot them.

Jacob's Cloak of Night was infinitely better than hers. It felt like wearing an ocean of darkness, compared to her, a pond. Hell, like this, she could walk right up to Joe and punch him in his stupid face and he wouldn't see it coming.

Beneath them, a dozen people walked past. She recognized every one of them. Uratha. And they were beat to fucking shit. Soaked in blood, holes all over them, and one of them was missing an arm. Holy mother fucking shit Clara was missing an arm. And the smallest person in the group, Avery, barely had a face anymore.

"Jack... Jack wouldn't do that."

"Nope. The curse did that." Jacob chuckled, barely more than a whisper, and pat her on the shoulder. "But they're all alive. Damn."

"You were really hoping Jack would kill some of them, weren't you?"

"Of course."

"Did... did you know this was happening tonight?"

The elder Nosferatu grinned at her, looked below, and didn't answer. Which was an answer itself. He knew. He fucking knew Avery was going to attack Maria tonight. He knew Jack would be in his ritual room while it was happening, and immediately make a dash for the cathedral when he left. Maybe he hoped Jack would be too late, and Maria would be dead or something.

The fucker arranged for Jack's meeting with Black Blood, to happen tonight, so this shit show would happen without his interference, or at least delay it. And most importantly, he'd probably been banking on the curse killing some of them.

"Jacob, you are a giant, fucking colossal asshole."

"I know, right?" He chuckled again, and gestured down to the werewolves walking past. "I could kill them, right now. I could jump down and end their fucking lives. I'd kill everyone except Avery, at first. But then I'd Kiss her, and drain her nice and slow, make her enjoy it, so her last moments were filled with self loathing."

"Dude, you need to let this go."



That, was dumb. Jacob snapped his bandage-covered eyes toward her, and slowly, he withdrew his hand from her shoulder.

“You had your revenge, Triss. I haven’t.”

“And you know it’s not the same. Jeremiah and Angela were fucking insane.” Christ, just saying Angela’s name filled her with rage. Then remorse, and frustratingly, guilt. “And they would have killed us all if they got the chance. Avery’s just trying to help.”

Sighing, the man shook his head. “Don’t give me that shit you little fucker. You killed her for revenge and no other reason. And for all your tiny little brain can manage, it can’t understand the larger picture here. You don’t get to rationalize bullshit. You don’t get to dismiss an action, because it fucking fits your world view at the time.”

“I—”

Jacob’s grip found her throat, and she froze, staring at him, as the man held her second life in his hands. “Listen to me, and listen closely, young witch. Rules, ideals, morality, these are inventions. People made them up. There are no good guys, no bad guys, no villains or heroes. There is no God in the sky telling us what we should or shouldn’t do, and no permeating energy in the universe guiding us onto a path of zen and inner peace. There’s only one fucking thing in this whole god damn plane of existence that’s real, and that’s the actions we take.” One hand still holding her throat, he pointed at his temple with the other. “You’ll never be a true witch until you understand that. All that matters, the only thing with any meaning or value, are actions. Say what you want, think what you want, rationalize, appeal to whatever god or morality you want, none of it matters. The only thing that fucking matters, is what you do, or don’t do. And Avery took something away from me that I can never, ever replace.” He leaned in closer, and tightened his grip. “Do you really think you can convince me, that I shouldn’t get my revenge?”

He let go, and turned his head back down toward the werewolves. Even with the speech, his Cloak was perfect.

“I... I guess I can’t.” Sighing, she looked at the street as well, and furrowed her brow as rats poured out of the cathedral. Barely visible from a distance, the tiny, dark bodies disappeared into Dolareido, vanishing into dark corners, gutters, and a million crevices the city provided them. “But, it’s not all that shit I was thinking about, dude. I was... thinking about you.”

Jacob said nothing, face still pointed to the street below, but his usual jackass smile was gone. She had to be careful.

“I mean, I don’t think you’ll be happy if you kill Avery, you know? Cause, yeah, anarchy and nihilism and all that, but I don’t think you could ever be happy being a fucking killer. I mean, you are, but not that kind of killer. Avery’s just trying to save lives and shit. And... and you seem pretty happy with Samantha. Right?”

Using the Samantha word managed to make him wince, if only a little. For all the crazy sex Jacob and Samantha had, to the point every witch had seen the woman naked and cumming by now, there was more to their relationship than mindless sex. Sometimes they went into his alcove, and came out a few hours later, no sex had. A few hours, talking. Clearly they had some sort of connection.

“I like her, Triss. I like her a lot. But I’m not going to abandon my plans because of...” Sighing again, he crouched lower on the ceiling as Antoinette and Elaine jumped down from the cathedral, and walked inside. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter. If I killed Avery now, people would blame this on me.” He gestured to the church, implying whatever it was Maria was up to. “Avery can wait.”

Triss nodded, and made damn well sure to not ask about what the fuck he meant by plans. Old as the bastard was, he probably had a dozen plans in motion at any given time, some of them probably decades, even centuries old. Better she didn’t stick her nose into shit; it might get stuck.

“Think Jack’s alive?” she asked.

“Overheard the wolves say he was. Maria and Damien too.”

“Really?” Damn, fucker was multi-talented to overhear that.

“Yeap. They injured the both of them, badly. They’ll all be out of commission for weeks, maybe months.”

“Daaaamn.” She shivered and rubbed her arms. For Maria to be seriously injured was a big deal. Yeah sure, Damien too, quick little fuck, but Maria was a force. Everyone was terrified of that bitch and her mastery of Nightmare. If they hurt her and Damien badly, then the Lancea et Sanctum was out of commission for a while. Which meant...

“Jacob?” she asked.

“Yeap. Now that Maria’s out of the picture, Garry’s going to push on the Invictus. He’ll strike while the iron’s hot.” Grinning, Jacob got up, and jumped away, back toward their cave.

“The fuck? Wait for me!”

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~~Eric~~

Garry's phone buzzed, and he checked it. The frown on his face said it all. Whatever had happened hadn't gone exactly the way he wanted, but not as bad as it could have gone for him, either.

"Alright, get out of here," he said, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

Jessy, still cradling her busted jaw, gave the man the finger. She'd managed to get the jaw back in place, and her vitae or whatever was doing work to keep the bones together, but she didn't want to risk fucking it up more by talking yet.

"The fuck happened?" Eric asked.

"Go ask Avery about it. Or Jessy, once she gets debriefed." He shrugged, leaned back against the sill, and sighed. "That Jack, he's a real fucking problem, you know that?"

"Jack? You mean the curse?"

"Yeah, the fucking curse. He's gonna kill someone at this rate."

"Wha—"

"I said get out of here." Garry dismissed him with a hand wave, and a half dozen vampires pointed their guns at Eric.

Sighing, Eric and Jessy got up, and did as ordered. No one shot them in the back, or stopped them from leaving. They just walked out, and it was like nothing happened.

Snarling, Jessy pulled out her phone, and her eyes went wide. "Holy shit!" And of course, the talking was quickly followed by a groan of pain.

"Don't talk. We should have your jaw in a sling."

"It'll heal by tomorrow night," she whispered, slurring her words together so she barely moved her mouth. Healed by tomorrow, sure, but aching and fucked up for days. Sighing and groaning, she stared into her phone and texted something in it before showing it to him.

Tash's, ASAP.

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Jessy opened the door with her key, and they stepped into Natasha's apartment. Clean, a lot of function over fashion. Very Natasha.

"Natasha?" he yelled. "Hey, it's Jessy and Eric." No answer.

Jessy grumbled and stomped forward, immediately regretted stomping and hurting her jaw, and instead gently walked her way around the apartment.

Eric sniffed the air, but it was hard to smell Tash. Not cause he couldn't smell vampire, he could, plenty, but vampires didn't smell very different from each other. Hints of ash and dust and not much else. But he followed what he could smell, and did his best to ignore Jessy's scent as he drifted toward the bedroom.

Oh shit.

"Jessy, she's in here."

Jessy came in after him, groaned, and sat down on the bed beside her. A stake stuck out from her heart, a classic wooden stake, though thin, and shiny. Laminated? Whatever it was, it didn't smell like wood. Smelled like nothing.

Without ceremony, Jessy yanked out the stake and threw it away, hard. It dented the wall before it bounced on the hardwood floor.

Eric stood beside her, and waited. He'd have to do the talking for Jessy.

Natasha sat up with a jolt, and Eric tensed like someone had just thrown a bomb into the room. Guess they woke up from a staking the same way they woke up come dusk: violently.

"What, w-what's going on!?" Natasha spun around on the bed, and Jessy ducked her head back seamlessly, dodging a near backhand to the face. "Jessy? Eric? I—"

Eric put up his hands. "Calm down. You're in your apartment. We just pulled a stake out of you." Sighing, he picked up the stake and showed it to her. "Sunrise isn't far off."

She stared at him like he'd just explained the world was ending. But slowly, her eyes drifted between him, the stake in his hand, and Jessy, still at her side.

"Jessy, you—"

"Her jaw is broken. She's trying to avoid talking."

"Yeah," Jessy whispered, wincing as she did. "You ok?"

“I... I’m fine, I guess. I...” Her eyes fell, and she stared at the bed. From looking like a surprise apocalypse had hit, to looking like her heart had just been ripped out by her boyfriends, was—oh shit.

“The boys did this to you?” he asked.

Natasha winced, and scrunched up the bed sheets in her hands. Slowly, she pulled them up to herself, half covering her legs, and she buried her face in them as they pulled over her knees.

“The... the p-p-pack went to confront Maria.”

“Jessy shared some details with me on the way here,” he said. “Apparently, Damien sent out an alert when they arrived.”

“He was there?” she asked, lifting her head from her blanket and knees.

“Yeah. Jessy got the message, but we couldn’t do anything about it. Garry had us locked up.”

“W-Wh—”

Eric held up a hand. “Jessy will fill you in. But yeah, Garry wanted us out of the way while Avery dealt with Maria. Was hoping Avery and the gang would kill her, I suppose.”

“But she didn’t?”

“No. According to what Damien’s told Jessy in the past ten minutes, the werewolves kicked their asses, pretty badly. It was looking bad, but then Jack... Jack showed up.” The room went silent. If Eric didn’t know better, he’d figure the temperature of the room dropped, cause he sure as hell felt ice prickling his skin. “Is he really that bad?” he asked. “I mean yeah, Jessy and I found him dealing with that... giant... spider monster... solo.” Dumb question.

Jessy nodded, slow, and not because of the pain in her jaw.

“I... I haven’t seen him cut loose myself,” Tash said, “b-but Antoinette and Elaine think he’s dangerous. Super dangerous. And you mean he, um, d-did that... to Avery?”

“Nearly killed her and everyone else in the pack,” he said. That was probably not the best way to word it. Natasha looked at him, eyes so wide he could see the white around them, and he put up his hands. “Nearly. No one died.”

The relief on her was blatant. “Good.”

“Good?” he asked. “Because of Arturo and Matthew? They’re the ones that staked you.”

She nodded. “It was Avery’s order. She t-texted Arturo something, and they were leaving, and then he... he got me.”

“I mean, I get that it’s not deadly to a vampire. But still, I figured you’d be—”

“I am angry,” she said, voice a lot steadier than he’d ever heard it. “I am. W-With Avery, and the boys. But... not as angry as the Prince will be.”

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Stupid idea? Stupid idea. His life in a nutshell.

Sighing, he walked back into the apartment building, back up the stairs, back down the hallway, and back up to Avery’s door. A small knock and a few seconds later, he was in the apartment with a dozen werewolves. No Garry, and no other vampires with guns this time either.

The pack looked like shit. For a second, he’d thought they’d gotten into a fight with a swarm of killer bees, considering every one of them was covered in red welts. But they weren’t welts, they were holes, many of them still bleeding. Bite marks?

It didn’t stop there. Broken limbs, broken fingers, gashes, giant bruises, the works. The whole group had been thoroughly trashed. Some of them looked on the verge of tears as they sat around, licking their wounds; metaphorically.

“Holy shit,” he said. “I—” Words stopped, and he stared hard at Clara, and her one arm.

She looked away and shook her head. “It’ll grow back. In... in time. A month... or two.”

One of the joys of being a supernatural creature, especially a werewolf. He wasn’t sure it made up for the apparent lifetime of strife, but still.

“What are you doing here?” Avery asked. She lay on the couch, TV off, with her head on the couch arm, and face looking up. It was barely a face. He’d seen lasagna with more defined facial features. “Looking for an apology?” Her words were a slurry mess, what with her destroyed and swollen lips and probably tongue, too.

“No. No, I figure you were doing what you thought you needed to do, so you could save the day.” Sighing, he looked between the group another time, and eventually his eyes settled on Matthew and Arturo. “How’s that working out for you?”

They looked away as well. Lot of guilt in the room. Except from Avery of course, who sat up and glared at him between puffy slits of red flesh for eye sockets.

“Might have gone better if you were there to help us.”

“Me? Why would I go?”

“Because if the Gauntlet comes down, this city goes down with it. Millions die. What about that aren’t you getting?”

“City’s been doing fine for hundreds of years.”

She shook her head. “Things are different now, and you fucking know it. The azlu showed up for a reason.” She gestured to David, and regretted it immediately, wincing and groaning before lying back down.

“So your plan is, what, to burn every bridge you’ve made?” he asked.

“Garry wouldn’t do anything he couldn’t recover from, politically. If he killed Jess, he’d start a war with the Invictus, and he’d be the bad guy. Can’t have that.”

Eric stepped around the couch and frowned down at her. “You mean that war he’s been slowly building up to, with Terra Den and the territory skirmishes?”

“Yeah, that war.” She shrugged, regretted that too, bit back a yelp, and relaxed back on the couch. “He promised me he wouldn’t kill you or Jessy.”

“He broke her jaw.”

“Like I fucking care.”

Muscles tightened, fingers curled into fists, and he glared down at the impulsive asshole as the wolf in him not-so-quietly suggested he kick her ass. It’d be easy right now, and dirty as hell.

“So what now? Maria’s still alive, and she’s going to want revenge.”

“Like I’m telling you anything.”

“You—”

“Eric, it’s obvious by now that you have no intention of joining the pack, or any pack. You’re a ghost wolf, and you’ve thrown your lot in with the vampires. That’s why Garry agreed to lock you up with Jessy for the night.”

He folded his arms across his chest, and glared. It wasn’t a good glare. He couldn’t muster up that kind of anger, put it all on the surface like that, like Avery could.

“I’m not a vampire. I’m not Invictus.”

“Sure. Whatever. Doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with Maria, or Garry will. I’ll do my fucking job cause it’s the reason I am what I am. It’s why Luna gave me this gift. And gave you this gift.” She gave him the finger — not the gift she was talking about — and relaxed on the couch as she closed her eyes. “The problem is Jack.”

Wait, Garry will? Shit. If Garry wanted to make a direct move on Maria, now would definitely be the time. But from what he knew of vampire politics, it’d be risky.

“Jack. He—”

“Is possessed by something evil as fuck,” she said. “He kicked our asses, and enjoyed every second of it. I got him good and he shrugged it off. Jesus, if something pisses that kid off in the wrong place, he’s going to kill everyone.”

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~~Natasha~~

Jessy rubbed her shoulders and hugged her. The two sat on Tash’s couch, in silence, watching the news that was on mute. Kine news was borderline meaningless to them, but she didn’t know what else to do.

“Should we get ice cream?” Jessy asked, barely moving her mouth as she did.

Natasha managed a small chuckle, but it was soft and weak, and died a second later.

“It’s not a b-break up, Jessy. They... they did what they did because Avery w-wanted me out of the way. Probably thought I’d interfere.” Avery was smart enough to know Tash was still on Maria’s side. Which was wrong. Tash was on the side of the truth, on hunting evidence, on understanding that events occurred with details, nuance, and degrees of granularity. People like Avery and their ‘stop something at all costs’ attitude were a menace. And stupid. The bitch was smart, and stupid, and that made her dangerous.

“Then they coulda just gone and did their thing without telling you! Staking you is crossing a line, Tash.” Jessy shook her head, groaned in pain, and then shook Natasha, softly. “Dump their asses. Then we can rent a few romance revenge movies and binge.”



Tash rolled her eyes, and leaned her head into Jessy's shoulder. Much as Jessy was basically a man in a woman's body, she tried to do the girly girl thing, even if all she had were clichés.

"They might have d-done it anyway," Tash said, anger bubbling up, "even if Avery hadn't t-told them to. Art and Matt, they... p-probably thought I needed to be protected from what was going to happen."

"You don't need protecting! You were a Right Hand of the Invictus. You—"

"They weren't p-protecting me from getting hurt. They were protecting me from... from seeing something b-bad happen. M-Maybe to them, maybe to Maria." And that, she had to admit, was a genuine concern. Natasha knew her strengths and weaknesses, and seeing horrible things happen to people was definitely something she struggled with.

"Bullshit. You're stronger than that, Tash. You can handle things others can't. Just because you haven't turned into a hardass doesn't mean they've got something you don't. If anything, it's the shitheads like Maria that are broken. They've lost something that you haven't."

Natasha smiled. Jessy was half right, and it felt nice to hear it, even if it was all mumbled.

"As m-much as I'd like to hang and watch movies, I need t-to report back to the Prince. And it'll be sunrise soon."

"Gonna tell her what the boys did?"

"It w-was Avery's order. I have to." And she might have told her even if Avery hadn't given the order. What the boys did, it wasn't just a huge violation of her trust, it was a huge strike against the Ordo Dracul in Dolareido. It was bigger than her, and she wasn't stupid enough to think her personal feelings on the matter meant she could hide what happened.

"Damn. Shit is gonna hit the fan. Carter and Clara are definitely losing their apartments."

"We need more information. We—" Her laptop, sitting on the nightstand beside her, rang. Jack's avatar came up.

"Speak of the devil."

Nodding, Tash accepted the call. Both women winced openly.

Jack sat in front of the screen, leaning back in a nice leather chair, one elbow on its arm and his forehead resting in his palm and fingers. Two crows sat upon his shoulders.

For a single, fleeting moment, Tash thought he looked like a king, a weary king, one who'd come back from war with its scars on his person and soul. Certainly on his person. He was covered from head to toe in cuts, and four huge gashes ran from his neck to his pelvis, deep enough the girls could see his insides.

Jessy leaned in over Tash's shoulder, and groaned like she was in pain. Sympathy pain, probably. "Jack! Holy fucking shit dude, what happened?" And then she groaned in real pain from her jaw.

The boy sighed, eyes still hidden in his left palm, while his right hand found his buzzed hair and rubbed. Blood, everywhere, and not his own.

"You got Damien's message?"

"Yeah, I did," Jessy said. "But Garry had me and Eric held up. Didn't want us interfering with whatever happened." She frowned and rubbed her face. "Fucker broke my jaw. Only just got it working. God, you have no idea how much this hurts."

Slowly, Jack revealed one of his eyes between his fingers, and stared at Jessy. She stared back. And they started laughing. Which of course ended quickly for both vampires, Jack clutching his gut with his other hand and groaning, while Jessy held her jaw and copied the sound.

"He let you go though?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, after Avery did whatever she planned to do. Which, from Damien's text, you put a stop to."

"Yeah, I guess. You ok Tash? You're looking kinda... I don't know."

She nodded and looked down. "It's... um... the boys, they... staked me, b-before they joined Avery." It hurt saying it. It hurt more, seeing her friend's eyes furrow with rage.

"Jesus. Avery's order?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Well, I... the curse beat her face into a pulp, if that makes you feel any better."

"Y-You know what? It does." She nodded sagely, earning a warm chuckle from the woman beside her.

"Damien didn't go into much detail in his texts," Jessy said, "just that you stopped Avery and kicked their asses. But he also said some things went down that were pretty bad. Wanna elaborate?"

He groaned again, and rubbed his forehead in his palm. "Maria knows that I killed Lucas."

Tash froze. “What? H-How?”

“The curse told her. To fuck with me.”

“What a fucking asshole!” Jessy said. “But, I mean, it’s not like Maria can just kill you anymore, right? You got that curse protecting you.”

Jack peeked through his fingers again, and looked to Jessy, hidden weight pressing his whole body into the chair harder than it had a moment before.

“Yeah. Until that situation gets sorted, I’m gonna sleep here at the Prince’s. I’ll talk to Michael tomorrow night.”

Jessy shook her head. “Dude, you’re gonna need at least a week to—”

“I know, I know. But it has to be done, before Michael does something... uninformed.” Sighing, the young man closed his eyes, and they disappeared behind his fingers again as he cradled his forehead. “And things get worse.”

“Course they fucking do.”

“We can’t trust Jacob.”

Tash blinked, and looked back at Jessy before Jack again. “Um, I d-don’t think any of us trust Jacob.”

“Dial it up to eleven, cause I’m convinced Black Blood and him are up to something.”

“B-But, what about your mom?”

He shook his head again. “Don’t tell her. I’ll talk with Antoinette about it, and I know she’ll agree. Telling Mom will only tip him off.”

Every time Jack got involved in anything, the weight on his shoulders grew. Now, he looked like he was being crushed by a mountain, face still half hidden behind his hand, while his other gripped the arm of the chair like he wanted to kill it.

“He... he seems to like her, Jack,” Tash said.

“I think he does, too. But you and I both know elders will sacrifice almost anything to reach their goals. No offense to Daniel or Antoinette, but Jacob is the most dangerous vampire in this city. The fucker is too smart, and underneath all that Joker bullshit, I know he’s a calculating villain, playing for the long game.”

Sighing, Tash nodded, Jessy did too, and Tash leaned in. “Um, Art and Matt... are they...”

“Clara and Avery got the worst of it. Art and Matt took a decent amount of damage from silver, from Damien, but they’ll be fine. Not sure how long it takes werewolves to recover from silver damage, but if it’s anything like vamps and fire, they’ll probably need a few weeks or more.”

Sighing heavier, she leaned back into Jessy. “I... I guess I should be happy about that.”

“Nah,” Jack said. “I get it. And I saw the looks in their eyes. They looked guilty as all hell. Clara did too, considering she bit off Damien’s leg.” Both women winced audibly. “And I... the curse, he... tore off Clara’s arm.” They winced louder. “Far as I know, werewolves can regrow limbs, right?”

Tash nodded. “Y-Yeah. She’ll be fine! D-Don’t worry.” Her words didn’t seem to help much. The poor man sighed, and Tash struggled to not wince again as she watched the flesh through his gashes rise and fall. “She... she won’t blame you.”

“Sure about that?” He lifted his head and leaned back in the chair, and Tash could practically see the weights tied around his neck. “I ripped her arm off, Tash.”

“You didn’t! The curse did.”

Slowly, his fingers found the necklace he wore, and gently fiddled with it as he looked down.

“I could make some sort of comparison I suppose, between me and an owner with a dog. Who’s to blame if the dog bites someone? But it’s a pretty weak comparison.” He shrugged, and groaned for the effort.

Tash didn’t believe him. He thought it was an accurate comparison. Or, he felt it was accurate, even if he knew it wasn’t. Guilt was a horrible thing.

“Jack,” she said softly. “I... can I talk them? The Uratha. I want to... I d-don’t know, see if there was anything I could have d-done.”

“I’d give them their space for now, Tash. After tonight, shit’s gonna happen. You say Garry held you hostage, Jessy?”

“Yeap.”

“Then we have no choice but to assume Garry and Avery are working together. Now that Maria’s injured and out of the way, I fully expect Garry to make a move on the Invictus, and he’ll use Avery.”

“How?” Jessy asked. “Not like Avery’s gonna agree to join a covenant war.”

“She still thinks Maria’s up to something. Until I convince her otherwise, she’ll consider Maria and the Lancea et Sanctum to be overt enemies. And we know Michael will back Maria. Then there’s

the whole thing with Terra Den and Xnomina, and..." He looked up, took another deep breath that showed his insides, and hardened his gaze as he looked back to the two of them. "Shit's going to hit the fan, Jessy. And honestly, I'm not sure the Prince is going to do anything about it."

Jessy got up and paced circles around the couch and nightstand. "Why didn't Garry just kill me, then?"

"Cause he's gotta play this right. If he oversteps, the Prince and the sheriff will call bullshit and interfere. And it'll be hard for Garry to convince all the Carthians to go to war if he starts it with a sucker punch. But if he can get the Carthians and the Invictus to slowly boil up to more violent skirmishes, well, we'll be at each other's throats before we know it."

Jack was right. Vampires weren't soldiers, or robots. They were loners who only wanted to be left alone so they could feed and fuck. Garry couldn't just say 'fight!' and have a hundred Carthians throw themselves into a might grinder. Lucas only managed that using a strange, magical influence from Tony's old den. A loci, according to Antoinette.

But the Carthians and the Invictus already hated each other. If Garry built up the situation and got everyone on board through time and circumstances, then they'd fight for him, like they did against the Lancea et Sanctum. And if he built up the situation over time, like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Prince would have a hard time saying either covenant was specifically at fault. She'd default to a neutral position, as long as the covenants didn't damage the Masquerade or her city.

Jessy sighed and nodded as she paced. "And with Maria and Damien out of the way for a while, and you too for that matter, Garry has the room to push a little harder, all without ever making himself look the bad guy."

"Yeap," Jack said. "I'm guessing in the next week, he's gonna incite some violence over some territory the Invictus have had for a while, that you guys probably took from the Carthians in the past decade or so. Something he can claim rightfully belongs to the Carthians." He leaned toward the camera, the motion enough to have Tash frowning and looking away from his torn open torso. "And if he starts a war, you know what Michael is gonna ask me to do."

Tash didn't meet his gaze. Slowly, she nodded, and leaned back on her couch.

If the Carthians and Invictus actually went to war, Michael would ask Jack to kill Garry.

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~~Damien~~

Matthias lay beside Maria's coffin, unconscious, drained, and happy. Maria lay within, its door open, and the coffin upright against the wall.

"Secure, sir," one of the thralls said. A woman in an Invictus suit, with an ear piece and sunglasses. She looked ridiculous wearing sunglasses inside, but the Invictus generally preferred when their trained thralls and ghouls all looked the same.

He nodded, leaning on his crutch. "Very well. Leave us."

The thrall raised a brow, visible over her glasses, before she looked to Maria. Maria nodded, as Damien knew she would. The thrall, realizing her mistake not trusting the word and obeying the command of a Right Hand, gulped, nodded to Damien, and left.

The place was still a mess, but the blood had been wiped up, area bleached and coated in other cleansing chemicals, and emergency repairs made to Maria's gates. It'd be safe to sleep in. Maybe not as much as before, but enough for one night at least, especially now that Maria's specialist ghouls sat within the tunnel, fully armed.

Sighing, Damien hobbled over to the coffin, and stood there, eyes downcast.

"Madam Turio," he said.

"Mister Burksen," she said.

"I..." He frowned, still looking down. What to say? How to say it? "I..." Coming up with what to say was a part of the problem. He'd left Maria in the dark too long, and trying to come up with a convenient explanation for everything felt hollow and wrong. "I'll... be honest with you, about anything you ask. Swear upon the Lord, Longinus, and my soul."

She stared at him, expression unreadable. Angry? Sad? Disappointed? He'd have an easier time reading a stone wearing a mask.

"Mi... Damien. You fought well tonight."

He lifted his head, and stared at her. And for the first time probably in the woman's life, she looked away first, unable to hold his gaze.

"You don't want to know about what happened that night?"

“What’s there to tell, Damien? That... Ripper creature made it clear. Jack, forever surprising us, managed to... defeat a Kindred fifty times as old as he, in a battle of wills?” Sighing, she shook her head again. “The boy is a marvel, but there are limits. No, if Jack managed to break your will, then your will was compromised beforehand.”

“It—”

“Compromised by Lucas and his insanity, Damien. You lost faith in him, because he no longer deserved your faith.” She shifted in her coffin a little, and snarled in pain; probably tried to lift the arms she didn’t have. “He’d become a twisted man, and you saw that. He dragged you into Hell, and you went, despite your wavering faith. And in the end, it was a weakness Jack exploited. Am I correct so far?”

“Y... Yes, Maria.” He looked down and squirmed in his shoes. Shoe. “In a way, it is—”

“It is not your fault Lucas died, Damien. And it is not Jack’s.” Pain wracked her voice, causing it waver, as if she were about to cry. “Lucas, and Lucas alone, bears the weight of his demise.”

Damien came closer, and forced himself to look Maria in the eyes. She was about to cry. If she’d been Blushing Life, tears would have touched her cheeks.

“You won’t kill Jack?”

“Of course not. I... I am not some mindless, emotional woman, lost to reason in the wake of grief. I...” She shook her head. “Please, close my coffin and leave m—”

“Maria.” He interrupted her, and that was not something you did to an elder, especially Maria. “Why weren’t your ghouls here tonight?”

“What? Matthias—”

“Not him.” He gestured past him, down to the tunnel to the ghouls armed with rifles, too far to hear the two vampires speak. “Them. Your day guard. You knew the Uratha were a danger. You knew they’d come for you eventually. And yet you... didn’t prepare.”

She slowly lifted her gaze to him, and it melted away in shame.

“I have my reasons.”

Sighing, he came in closer again, until his feet almost touched the bottom of her coffin.

“Maria. I saw the look in your eyes, when you asked me to leave. You were happy I was willing to stay, but you also wanted me to go.”

“I—”

“Don’t.” He leaned in closer, and grabbed the edge of her coffin with his free hand. It was a huge, heavy thing, black and filled with white lining, and as scary as Maria looked, it fit her well, like a vampire throne. Except now, it looked less a throne, and more a true coffin. “Just don’t. You were hoping they’d kill you, weren’t you?”

She didn’t have to say it. Her body sagged, and the once proud and mighty Nosferatu lowered her gaze again.

“Damien, do not pry. My business is my own.”

He snorted. “Bullshit.” Her gaze snapped up, but he held his stare. “Maria, if it wasn’t for you, my dreams would be dead and I’d be eating out of the palms of the Invictus for scraps. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t know a damn thing about how music, or history, or... what women want.” Because for some reason, their conversations often drifted in that direction. “I fought to keep you alive tonight, and it wasn’t for any covenant reason. I stuck around, even when you said I could leave, because I genuinely wanted to keep you alive. By God, Natasha wants to keep you alive!”

That earned a few blinks of surprise from the armless woman.

“She does?”

“Yes! She’s been trying to convince the Uratha that you’re innocent of their concerns for weeks. Matthew and Arturo had to stake her tonight, cause they knew she’d interfere.” Hopefully Tash wouldn’t mind him sharing some of the info he’d gotten from her latest texts tonight.

“How horrible.” Her expression didn’t match her words. Much as she was depressed and distraught, knowing that Tash had been trying to help her managed to edge a tiny smile onto the corners of her lips. “I had no idea, about Natasha. She asked about Lucas before, and... and what things I might do, but I didn’t realize she’d vouch for me.”

“Maria, you are a scary woman. Most of the city is terrified of you. But no one wants you gone. You’ve never earned anyone’s ire, except for that asshole Garry. Why... why would you let yourself die?”

“Because! Because... I am tired, Damien. I am tired of this life. I am tired of this Nosferatu curse, and looking like a corpse. I am tired of struggling against other Kindred like Garry Tones, or the Prince. I am tired of... being alone.”



His turn to look down and away from her gaze. “I... I don’t know how anyone will be able to replace my sire for you.” She wasn’t wrong. She looked like a corpse pulled out of a river. Only another Nosferatu could ever form a sexual bond with her, or someone strange like Lucas. “But that doesn’t mean there isn’t one. And that doesn’t mean you can’t have friends, like me.”

After a heavy, long sigh, she leaned her head back against the cushion of the coffin, and closed her eyes. “You are right, of course. I... will not be so reckless with my life in the future, Damien.”

“Thank you.” Unfortunately, a short conversation wasn’t going to solve all of Maria’s troubles. A century of talking wouldn’t.

“And... thank you, Damien, for... for more than simply standing with me tonight. I have... enjoyed our time together.” Her smile grew into something almost reaching genuine contentment. “Do not think that because I have lost my arms, and piano, that you are to stop practicing.”

His frown faded, replaced by a smile to match Maria’s. “I won’t.”

Perhaps a short conversation could do more than he thought it could?

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“Damien! I—what tae fuck!? The fuck happened to ye?”

“Werewolves happened.”

Fiona gasped. “Eric?”

“No, the others. They attacked Maria. I was there.”

“What tae fuck? Did—”

“No one died. And I can tell you more tomorrow night.” He sat down on the edge of his apartment bed, set the crutch aside, and the moment he did, the weight of his body pulled him down onto his apartment blankets. All energy, gone.

“Sunrise is in twenty minutes,” she said.

“I know. I... I asked you over, because I need a drink.”

“Ha! Ye silly dobber. No need to dance around it.” She smiled down at him, standing in front of him by the bed, and looked him up and down. Slowly, the smile faded, and her eyes rested on the lump

where his leg should have been. He'd changed his suit, and had folded up the pant leg and tied it off at the missing stump, halfway down his thigh.

"It'll grow back," he said. "And—" He stopped himself as he watched her. Every second, her eyes grew heavier, and heavier, until she stared at the floor. Her shoulders quivered, and her breathing cut short with a few, quiet rasps. "Fiona, are you... are you crying?"

"Aye! Of course I'm cryin', ye wankstain!" She plopped down on the bed hard enough he bounced. He almost hissed or groaned in pain, but bit it down. Fiona never cried, and he didn't want to interrupt.

"Why? You've seen me injured before."

"We were nae dating back then!" Tears ran down her cheeks, and Damien stared, speechless. "And... and I ahways have tae smile! Cause if ah didnae smile, no one would smile. 'N folk keep getting hurt, 'n... 'n... ya didnae call me!"

He stared at her, processing. Fiona, crying. Fiona, accent as powerful as it got when she was drunk, but there was no smell of alcohol on her.

"I only had time to trigger my emergency app. Auto message to Jessy and Jack. I—"

She backhanded his shoulder. Not with any real power, but with the strength of a weeping little girl. It hurt more.

"Everyone's ahways fighting! I'm trying tae be positive, ye ken? Ahways smiling. But every time I look, someone's hurt, and now tis ye!" She grabbed the arm she'd hit, and hugged it tight to her side. "I left home cause I knew, if I stayed, folk would get hurt."

"You said you left because nothing happened there, and there wasn't much to eat." She'd also implied it was a boring as hell little Scottish town, but better to not say it.

"Aye, and that's true, but... but I knew, ye ken? I knew, around me, folk would get hurt. I didnae want that! I came here cause Dolareido was supposed to be fun, and... and no one I knew would get hurt. And..."

She wept. From perfectly calm, even happy one moment, to a fountain of tears the next. Not happy then, fake happiness? Or maybe she had been, but the reality hit her too hard this time for her to keep it at bay? He didn't know. She wasn't as simple as she appeared, or as dumb as she pretended to be, and the more he learned about her, the more he was convinced she didn't know how complex or smart she was either.

He slipped his arm out of her grip, onto her shoulders, and hugged her close to his side.

“I won’t be dying any time soon, Fiona,” he whispered. “The hunters are gone. That threat has passed. Avery was put in her place by Jack. That threat is... under control.”

“But, I hear Garry and the Invictus are gonna have a go?”

“They might, yeah. But if that happens, I can handle it.”

“And the tears! Azamel still says someone’s up to something! Dolareido could—”

He hugged her tighter, and she twisted so she could wrap her arms around him. Seeing him without a leg triggered something in her, made everything more real for her, like he was a soldier come home from war. What to say to her, then? Fiona was young, and despite the huge burden she had to carry with being Begotten, still young at heart. Amazing as she was, maybe he needed to say something a little softer?

“It’s going to be okay, Fiona.”

She laughed between her sobs, and buried her face into the side of his chest. “Liar.”

Ok, maybe not that.

“I... I’m not going to go anywhere, Fiona. I’m not going to die.”

“But—”

“And if shit happens again, I’ll make sure to message you, ok? We can set up a system, like Tash and Jessy have. If Azamel lets you.”

“Azamel is... is nae going to be around much longer.”

And there was that. The only parental figure Fiona had in the city was dying. Her world was being turned upside down over and over, and seeing him lose a leg probably snapped whatever foundation she’d felt comfortable building.

“Then we can talk with Sándor. Cause if... if I’d known...” If he’d known she would react this strongly to seeing him hurt again, he might have taken Maria’s offer to just walk, cause he couldn’t have Fiona cry like this, never again. If he’d known Fiona was this... this... “I love you, Fiona.”

She froze. The sobbing stopped, and her arms stopped squeezing. She didn’t pull away, but she’d turned into a statue.

“Yer... yer just saying that to make feel better, about ye nearly dying.”

“No. I’m not.”

“Yer... just being nice, cause I’m crying like a baby.”

“That’s not the reason either.” He turned his head and put a kiss in her big, frizzy red hair. Maria was a big part of the reason he’d said the words. She’d helped him see Fiona in a new light. And, honestly, seeing Fiona now, crying, over something very real, helped him see her differently again.

“I... I...” She rubbed her face into his chest, and squeezed him again. “I think I do, too.”

Relief flooded him, but a moment later, he laughed. She pulled away, frowning at him.

“Sorry! Sorry. Just... think?”

“Aye! Think! I’m nae some old bawbag like ye.” She buried her face in his side again, and this time hit him with her forehead a few times. “I dinnae know what... what it feels like, ye ken?”

He closed his eyes, let her hit him with her head a few times, and a few times more, before he hugged her tight to his side. He set his cheek on her hair, and rubbed her arm.

“It feels like... like, you want to hold them tight in some desperate need to be so close that it’s impossible. It feels like, you want them around you all the time, even just sitting near them. You want to hear their voice, all the time. It feels like you want to touch their body every night. And it feels like... if you saw them wounded, you’d find yourself bawling uncontrollable tears. You wouldn’t be able to help yourself. If they hurt... you hurt.”

That quickly went from soft to not soft, but it seemed to work. Fiona burst into loud sobs again, and hugged him even tighter.

“Aye! Tis like that.”

He smiled into her hair, and grit his teeth against the pain. He had half a femur, and all the flesh around it was just a chewed up lump. It hurt, immensely, but holding the crying little redhead was far more important. The moment was too meaningful to let something as meaningless as pain ruin it. He didn’t want it to end. Anything, he’d give anything, if he could keep holding her like this.

But sunrise was coming. Fiona, sniffing, pushed him onto his back, helped him get settled, and set her neck to his lips. Despite the rush, the thrill, the intoxicating impact of her monster blood on him, and despite his need to stay up and talk with his... his love, he succumbed to his daily sleep.

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~~Jack~~

Elaine smiled, finger waved, and left, leaving him alone with Antoinette in her master bedroom.

He collapsed onto the bed, naked, and dragged himself toward its center, before collapsing again. Even with a stomach full of fresh blood, he felt like total shit. His wounds had closed enough that his insides weren't visible anymore, thanks to the meal, but he could feel how fucked his innards were.

He could also feel how quickly he was healing. Ventrue and Gangrel were tougher than other blood clans, harder to injure, and could generally regenerate faster than the other blood clans. Gangrels especially, considering how easily they could morph their bodies with Protean. And Jack was probably healing faster than Michael could. The curse was a scary fucker.

Sighing, he touched the necklace around his neck, and shook his head. "Not taking this off anytime soon."

"Oh?" Antoinette said, sat nearby at her vanity desk. He couldn't see her, with his eyes pointed at the dark marble ceiling.

"Oh? You... you talked to him, Antoinette. Twice now. You know how fucking horrible he is."

Her sigh was audible.

"Oui, quite. But he also accomplished something tonight I fear you could not have done on your own."

He almost yelled a retort, but after a few seconds to think about it, he laughed. She was baiting him. "Yeah, ok, Emperor."

"Quoi?" She chuckled softly. Yeap, he'd caught her leading the conversation. Tricksy Prince.

"You know if I rely on this curse thing, until I can't function without him, my journey toward the Dark Side will be complete." He shook his head and spread his arms, still staring at the ceiling. "I have to get rid of him, before that happens. And if I find myself in that sort of situation again, I'll talk my way out of it, instead of using my fists." Not that he thought words would have worked tonight, but stranger things had happened.

"Ah. Forever thinking ahead, my love."

"I guess, yeah."

Movements in the bed, indents and shifting sheets, announced Antoinette's approach. Slowly, she sank onto the sheets beside him, naked as well, and kissed his cheek.

"The necklace works well, then, if you had to remove it."

"It does, thank god. But it's not a perfect solution. The only perfect solution is just getting rid of him."

"The Ripper."

"Oh god please don't. He doesn't deserve a name."

"Agreed." Nodding, she cuddled into his side, careful with her arm, and kissed his neck. "For all the horrors that happened tonight, no one died."

"Yet. Garry's going to take advantage of this situation, and people are going to die."

"Perhaps. But it has not happened yet. Peaceful resolutions have been found in more hectic situations. Do not lose hope."

He turned his head, and met her third kiss, eyes closed. It would have been awesome if he could just ask her to deal with Garry for him, but she'd say no. It wasn't her place, and it didn't make sense for her covenant goals.

"I hurt Clara."

"Oh, my dear Jack."

"I... ripped off one of her arms." He knew she knew, but she hadn't mentioned it yet. And he had to talk about it.

Antoinette sighed, and nuzzled her cheek against the top of his head. "It must have been horrible."

"It... it was, yeah. The curse was driving, and he... fucking brutalized them." The sound of snapping bone, shrieking werewolves being eaten alive, and the sensation of Avery's face collapsing over and over to his fists, it was all burned into his memory. But the worst of it, was the look on Clara's face, when she saw him get back up from the remains of the piano, turned.

"She will regrow the limb. Uratha are resilient."

"Thank god. If I'd permanently fucked her like that, I—"

"The curse did that to her. Not you."

"Yeah, yeah I know."

Nodding, she sat up, twisted a bit to look down at him, and smiled. “I admit, I am somewhat relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“For such a horrible thing to occur, for the curse to unleash itself upon the Uratha, and for Maria and Avery to confront each other so, and yet no one perished? And better still, the necklace works better than I originally thought. I know there are many trials ahead, and that Dolareido suffers inevitable mayhem not seen since I enacted the purge. But all things considered, tonight could have ended so much worse, my love. Do not be so hard on yourself.”

“And Maria?”

Her face drifted down, and she sighed as she traced her fingers down his chest, softly, careful of his wounds. “I will speak with her privately. But I suspect it will not go as badly as you believe.”

“Uh, I killed the love of her life, Antoinette. She—”

“She knows what sort of man Lucas had become. Give the woman some credit, Jack, she is wise.”

He held up three fingers. “Three, Antoinette. Three elders, off their rockers with madness, have nearly killed me. Lucas, Tony, Viktor.”

She laughed. Such a nice sound, despite its almost villainous tone. She just had that sort of voice. “Maria is different. I will speak with her, I promise. And if I must, I will extend my protection to you officially as the Prince, since you killed Lucas in my defense.”

That was an interesting political angle. Antoinette had to be careful with whatever things she did as Prince; making enemies of both Invictus and the Carthians at the same time could get her killed. But, if she could make any decision she made seem reasonable, arguably defensible, then she could interfere with their business without risking her political position.

The Danse Macabre was such a pain in the ass.

“And Avery? She’s not happy I interfered.”

“You did, but you also let her live. She would be overstepping herself if she attacked you. And with the curse—”

“The curse I’m trying to get rid of.”

She frowned, a subtle expression, and she set a finger on his chin. “I want to be rid of it as much as you, my little Ventrue, but while it remains a tool, it would be foolish to discount it. A logical man such as yourself understands the value in accounting for all assets, yes?”

Damn, she was smart, using his own habits against him.

“Yes.”

“Indeed.” With a wicked smile, she traced the gashes on his chest; closed, but the discolored skin showed where they were. “And do not think that because I am Prince, that I would let tragedy befall you, even if it were an inconvenience to my position.”

“Uh, you saying you’d fight Garry?”

“Non. I am saying that I would not let him kill you, and I would officially remove you from the conflict, if he somehow managed to defeat you.”

He couldn’t help but grin at that. “So, dead as far as the covenants would be concerned, but not actually dead.”

“Exactly.”

“And sort of... your prisoner, I guess?”

“Mmm. Precisely.” Grinning again, she leaned back in closer, and this time made sure to softly press her breasts against his side, a bit of her weight on his shoulder. She caressed his buzzed hair, and instantly, he melted. “Tomorrow night, you should take some time to speak with Veronica, and introduce her to your home. I will speak with Maria.”

“And... and Tash, she—”

“She has informed me of what transpired. I will be speaking with the Uratha about that as well. Make no mistake, they harmed one of my dragons, and there will be consequences. But for now, worry not. Sleep.” He couldn’t see her mouth too well with how close she was, but he was sure he saw a smile there, absolutely serpentine.

Sighing, he nodded, and felt himself drift away as sunrise came. And as soothing as her touch was, he couldn’t get Clara’s screams out of his head.

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His daily torpor had not been fun. Lot of nightmares, swirling images of Damien and Maria getting torn up by werewolves, and of Clara, getting her arm ripped off. Him, ripping it off. Other images hit him too, like what he'd done to David's mind, and when he'd turned Avery's face into pulp, but it was Clara's face that kept coming back, over and over, haunting him.

The curse, Ripper, whatever, didn't have to hurt her like that. She'd regenerate the limb, but that didn't mean he had to fucking rip it off. Totally unnecessary. The curse had done it to spite him. And he'd told Maria about Lucas, to make Jack rely on him.

Well, it wouldn't work. Fucking jackass.

He got into an Invictus car with his new thrall to be, and soon, they stood at the door of his mansion.

"This is really yours?" Veronica struggled to stay standing, because she was still low on blood from yesterday, but also because she looked up and up and up until she almost fell over. Big, tall building.

"Yeah. Viktor Honors owned it, my grandsire, Elaine's childe."

"Child?"

"Childe, with an E at the end. Elaine sired him."

"Oh right! I get it." She nodded, rubbing her hands together nervously.

"Viktor died, then his childe Julias Mire, my sire, gained it. Then... he died, to some hunters. You uh, may have heard about it on the news, about crows swarming a hospital."

"Oh my god, that was your sire?"

He set a hand against the door, and half laughed, half sighed, as he looked down, shaking his head. "That was me."

"No way. No way! You—" She squeaked and jumped back as two crows swooped down out of nowhere. And of course, low on blood as she was, she fell. But Jack caught her, snapping his hand out and catching her wrist.

"Yeah, me," he said. Mulder and Scully cawed a few questions at him as they settled on his shoulders. "I'm alright, I'm alright. Still pretty torn up, but the cu... I heal quick." Nodding to no one, he let go of Veronica's wrist, offered her an assuring smile, and pushed the door open.

The entrance of the mansion was absurdly fancy, with the giant chandelier and the enormous staircase with curve railings, and red curtains and some giant paintings, all the beautiful Victorian stuff. Except the dust, that sucked.

“This is yours? I... I can’t even imagine how much this would cost. In this economy!”

Laughing, Jack hobbled over to the stairs clutching his stomach, sat down, and pulled some oats out for his friends. They pecked away, and Veronica stared at the two birds as much as the mansion around her.

“I was barely earning more than minimum wage over three years ago, Veronica. Now I... well, salary isn’t really a thing. The Invictus pay me, but there’s the Xnomina corp, and contracts that I affect as a Right Hand, and—” He stopped himself, and laughed again. God, Julias had info bombed him the first week of his life as a vampire, because he knew Jack liked that. Jack should probably go slower with someone he didn’t really know. “I’ll ease you into it. All you have to do for now is clean this place.”

“By myself? It’s, uh... pretty big.”

“No. I’ll be recruiting more thralls into service, but for a little while at least, you’ll be on your own.” Mulder flapped her wings at Veronica, and Jack chuckled as he nudged his head into the bird’s body. “Calm down. She’s my employee.” Slave. The word was slave. A happy, well-treated slave, and soon to be well-paid slave, but a slave, bound to the Vinculum. Never forget that she’s human, Jack, and you’re not.

He really shouldn’t have been so hard on himself about it. He gave her a fair deal. Memory wipe, or become a thrall. But it still ate at him.

“Can they understand you?” She stepped in a little closer, eyes on the birds. No disgust, but plenty of apprehension.

“Crows are damn smart.”

“Uh, not that smart.”

He laughed and nodded. “Vampires have lots of special abilities, like being able to talk with certain types of animals.”

Her eyes went wide. “Really?”

This, was strangely fun. She was so new, and innocent, but also interested, and smart enough to figure things out, to understand implication and impact. Antoinette knew what she was doing, picking Veronica for him.

“There are five types of vampires,” he said, and he held up five fingers. “Well, probably more, but most cities have five, including Dolareido. Ventrue like myself are naturals at Animalism, speaking with animals and controlling them, and Resilience; we’re damn hard to kill. But all the blood clans can do these things, too, just not as well.” Well, Gangrels were naturals at those things too, but no need to confuse her yet. “An ability unique to Ventrue, however, is Dominate. Which is... brainwashing, essentially.”

She gasped, but didn’t recoil. If anything, she only grew more intrigued.

“Wow. Um, is that what you’re doing to me?”

He winced, but quickly wiped the expression away. He was the vampire, she was the thrall. Maybe some day he’d embrace her, or another Kindred would, her Vinculum would be broken in her first death, and she would rise a vampire in her second life. But for now, she was human.

“No.” He pressed his thumb to his wrist hard enough to pierce his skin, and a small effort of will brought his dark blood to the surface. “Any vampire can create a Vinculum between thrall or ghoul, and master. Serve me well, and your future will be limitless.” No wonder Julias didn’t like doing this. It felt very vampire-y, like, the dark kinda things vampires did. The sort of things the Beast wanted to do.

She beamed at the sight of his blood, leaned in, and kissed it off his wrist. A second later, she groaned, and her eyes fluttered. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she’d just shot heroin.

“Why... why does it taste so good?”

“One of the great mysteries,” he said, smile subtle. “Be careful what you drink. My blood won’t make you immune to the blood of other vampires.” Nodding, he slowly slid his finger back along the wound, and the skin closed underneath the finger, like a magic trick. Predictably, Veronica gasped, and he outright laughed. She was fun.

She smiled at him, and her eyes lingered. There it was, the haze of the Vinculum. Another dose and she’d be completely bound, and willing to do nearly anything he asked. Hell, two doses was apparently enough to have her physically interested in him. Very interested. If he asked her to call him master, strip, and give him a blow job right now, she probably would, and enjoy doing it.

There was definitely a thrill in that. Thrill in being the master, and he could see she’d find thrill in being the submissive. But no thrill was going to tempt him to cheat on Antoinette. And, knowing

Antoinette, she'd invite Veronica into their bed eventually anyway, inevitably satisfying his new thrall's sexual desires.

Jack leaned back, and looked his thrall up and down a few times. Which immediately got her blushing, and she looked away as she rubbed her hands. Sure, he'd used an assertive gaze, but her response was so damn strong. No wonder some Kindred acquired a bunch of thralls and ghouls, and just spent all their time fucking and feeding on them.

He got up, scratched Scully and Mulder behind the head, and walked toward a side hall. "Come with me." Talking assertively, commandingly, it came naturally to him. No mental effort required, he just opened his mouth, and the once young, human Jack vanished, replaced by the Ventrue. It felt good to be in charge.

"Where we going?"

"A tour of the mansion. And then a tour of my sleeping cell."

She jogged up to catch up to him, and walked beside him and slightly behind. A glance back showed her eyes on the birds, a smile of wonder still on her face.

"Wait, cell?"

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"Oh my god, you have a dungeon."

She chuckled. He didn't. Slowly, he gestured to the cells. His own room wasn't in this particular wing of the underground labyrinth, but its tunnel was connected to this one's, making it a good opportunity to show her the dark side of being a vampire.

"I have no plans to ever mistreat you, or any other kine, Veronica," he lied. Never mistreat her, sure, but how many kine had he killed so far? "But not all Kindred are like me or my sire. Julias's sire, Viktor, was a brutal man. He tortured and killed hundreds of kine to death over the decades, right here in these cells."

"Jesus." Her eyes went wide, and she took a small step back from the cell, and from him, too.

Mulder and Scully cawed a few times. They felt it, the death, the horrible things that coated the walls, invisible but permanent.

“Don’t worry, he’s gone,” he whispered.

“Um, what?”

“Talking to my friends.” He pet the heads of each bird again, before he stopped and looked at one cell. “You don’t have anything to fear from me, Veronica, at least not me consciously. But all vampires can do”—nasty shit that will give you nightmares for the rest of your life—“horrible things, when the circumstances are right. So, always be on your guard, Veronica, even from me.”

He glanced over his shoulder to her, past Mulder, and found a scared, and intrigued woman. Scared was good. Intrigued, not so much.

“You’re, uh, kinda scary for a little guy, sir. Um, no offense!”

He laughed and shrugged. She’d made him laugh, that was good. Great, even.

“It’s ok. Yeah, I am small, but size means little to a vampire. I…” How much to scare her? It was important she understand the reality of the situation, but if he utterly terrified her, she’d probably snap and run, and he’d have to wipe her mind. “I was in a fight last night.”

“Oh. Is that why you’re limping?”

Sighing, he nodded, and started the walk back to his wing of the underground tunnels. “No harm in telling you. I fought some werewolves.”

“Werewolves!?”

He nodded, and pulled open the gate to a neighboring tunnel. “I… defeated them. Lot of broken bones, lot of blood.”

“You, by yourself?”

“More or less.” Further, into the tunnel, he opened another metal gate. “I made enemies last night, Veronica. And you need to know, because now that you’re my… mine, my enemies are your enemies. I’ll do my best to keep you out of the line of fire, but know that your life is in danger while you work for me. You’ll be taught basic self defense, and more importantly, how to use weapons. Pistols, and shotguns.” The easiest for civilians.

“Oh god. What have I gotten myself into?”

He smiled at her as he opened the last gate, showing his bed. “If you’re as smart as some people think you are, you’ve found a road to a long, long, long life of intrigue, adventure, and power.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Oh my.”

“And if you’re dumb, you’ve found a road to an early grave.”