~~Jack~~

“Oh… god….”

He couldn’t cum anymore. Just the thought of another orgasm made his insides ache in pain. No more, his balls cried. We’re dry!

The devil and her two imps didn’t seem to agree. Ashley and Julee had both let him drink them, just a little, just enough to spark the arousal in his Kindred body once more, without either of them succumbing to exhaustion for it. And they took advantage.

“One more?” Antoinette said, smiling up at him. The Prince was on her back on her bed, head propped up on a couple pillows, and still in her corset; she’d taken off by the boots then.

He was straddling her, his knees under her arms, his butt on her abdomen and corset. Hands still cuffed behind him, and utterly helpless against the attack of the two ghouls.

They were kissing his cock. The two of them, at the same time. Ashley grinned up at him as she slid her lips back and forth along the swollen head of his shaft, while Julee managed a couple of quick peeks, each earning a huge blush from her. But she too was kissing the glans of his member, suckling, licking, sharing the wet of their mouths over the sensitive skin.

And more than once, the two started kissing. Ashley laughed the first time it happened, but the next time she did it on purpose, and angled where her lips met his cock so they’d meet Julee’s lips too. And Julee reciprocated. Blushing so bright he thought she might die, Julee nudged her lips around to the front of his cock, and tried to keep his shaft along her mouth as she met Ashley’s. Every so often, his cock fell away as the girl’s drifted, and they continued to kiss each other without him.

The Prince chuckled. With her on her back, the two ghouls were on their knees on each side of her, leaning over her to come at Jack from left and right. It gave Antoinette a perfect view of everything that was happening. And gave Jack a perfect view of her as she watched her ghouls. She was smiling, laughing, and she reached up to guide her two ghouls back toward his cock.

And again, he found his shaft in the middle of their kisses. Julee slid her lips further down the side of his length, lips traveling his girth until she planted her kisses along the base of him. Ashley went in the other direction, and shifted around more toward Antoinette’s head so she could lean at Jack more directly. From straight on, she put her lips over the whole of the sensitive, engorged flesh of the head of his cock, and licked. Her tongue slipped out from her lips, went around and around and around, before she started to suckle as she settled her tongue along his member’s underside.

“I… going to cum soon.”

“About time.” Ashley lifted her head and reached out to poke his chest. “Been at this for fifteen minutes!”

Fifteen minutes of pure heaven. Painful heaven, but heaven. Another orgasm was liable to kill him, or at least hurt a bit, but that didn’t change that having two sets of lips kissing his cock was nirvana. Each lick, each suckle sent powerful waves of pleasure down through his length, and each made him quiver with the impending orgasm still building up. If not for his previous orgasms, he wouldn’t have lasted fifteen seconds.

Antoinette slid her hands out along her corset, between the two girls, and out to his hips. She pulled him a bit closer, sliding him across her a few inches until his cock was over her sternum. She wanted to see everything.

He gulped and did his best to keep the building warmth from exploding. Too good, he wanted to keep this going, even sucked dry as he was. Julee once again found her lips upon the head of his shaft, and again Ashley was there to meet her, trying to kiss her and him at the same time. Julee returned Ashley’s affection, kissing her friend more obviously, more directly, but doing her best to keep his cock against their lips as they did.

He couldn’t last against that. The familiar waves of bliss started to spread upward from between his legs, up his length, and a drop of precum joined the lips of the two ghouls. Julee pulled away a little, eyes going wide and staring at where the clear fluid dripped out of his cock, thick enough to ooze from him instead of falling like water. Ashley on the other hand had no such reservations, and she caught the precum along her tongue before putting her mouth back onto him.

Pure stimulation on his glans. With no one stroking his shaft, his orgasm came through only the sharp pleasure sparks along the tip, each forcing his muscles to squeeze down and build up the fluids. Almost painful, but oh god so fucking good, the ghouls suckled and kissed as another drop of precum leaked onto their awaiting lips. Julee didn’t pull away this time, and she looked up at him as she slid her tongue out to caress the underside of him once more, spreading his precum over the skin.

Too much. Another squeeze, another flex of his length, and the fluid came pouring out. Warm and thick, the white didn’t squirt out of him this time, but trickled out in thick, dripping waves. Each flex of his muscles caused another wave of it, and it flowed out of him onto the awaiting lips of the two ballerinas. Ashley smiled into the kiss, and angled her head to make sure his cum landed along her lips. And from her lips, onto Julee’s lips. The blond made sure to kiss Julee as much as she was suckling around the bulbous, engorged head of his shaft, until the thick white coated both their lips. When the cum started to pool along their kiss, no room left for the copious amount of fluids, Ashley slipped more of her mouth around his cock, just enough to cover the tip, and licked up the dribbling cum as it fell onto her tongue.

He collapsed. Two girls, kissing, licking, suckling his dick. Couldn’t handle it! He fell back and lay between Antoinette’s legs on his spine, hands still cuffed and pinned behind him. But the girls were relentless. Ashley, giggling like a maniacal villain, crawled over to where he fell, and reached out with a hand to grab the base of his shaft. Pointing it up, she again put her cum-covered lips around it, and pulled half of his shaft into her mouth. Julee crawled over as well, but she sat beside him, and gazed down at him as she licked her lips clean.

But as Ashley cleaned him, Antoinette moved. She slid her bare legs out from around him, and got onto her knees over him between his legs instead. Kneeling, she touched Ashley to nudge her aside, before she put her dark red lips along his shaft, and while gazing along his body to catch his eyes with her ruby gaze, she lowered her lips to swallow every inch of him.

He started panting as the goddess licked and suckled at the base of him, while the whole of his length met the wet warmth of her mouth and throat. Julee reached out to move the Prince’s hair aside to keep it out of the way, while Antoinette managed to milk a couple more drops of his cum out of him with painful bliss. The ghouls leaned in to stare at how the white-haired succubus kept the entirety of his length in her, and how her lips and tongue pulled at the base while she sucked him dry.

When his panting turned into whimpers, Antoinette lifted her head and wiped her lips with a single finger.

“Satisfied, my love?”

“Y-yes… god… yes.”

“Wonderful. Julee dear, please undo his shackles.”

Julee hopped off the bed and started digging around in the nightstand, for a key probably. Ashley on the other hand knelt beside him, and brought a finger to wipe her lips, the same way Antoinette had. Cute.

A minute later he had his cuffs off, and he was sitting up while leaning his weight back onto his hands behind him. The three women smiled at him, Ashley giggling, Julee blushing, Antoinette eating him with her gaze. Scary and thrilling at the same time.

“My pets, it is time for you to go. My love and I must spend time alone.”

Both girls whined their dissatisfaction, but turned and left as Antoinette shooed them away. Naked and bouncing, Ashley jumped off the bed, Julee close behind her, and the two strolled out of the inner chamber. Ashley made sure to take a peek behind her though, and sway her hips a little more than she usually did, before disappearing around the enormous vault door.

“Jack, if you would.” Antoinette turned around, and showed him her back, hand up to pull her hair out of the way over her shoulder. The corset was laced up from behind, with a layer of black between the strings and her skin.

He reached out and started to undo the knot, but not before he took a second to admire how absolutely, fucking amazingly hot the curvy Prince looked with the black corset emphasizing her hourglass shape. “So, tonight was… yeah, wow. So many fantasies fulfilled.”

The corset was so beautiful, and tight. Damn tight. As he undid the crisscrossing layers of it and at last exposed the naked back of the Prince, he touched her where the clothes had left an imprint along her skin. It healed quickly, vampire and all, but it couldn’t have been comfortable.

“That couldn’t have been fun to wear,” he said.

“I disagree.” She turned to face him again, reached out, and set the corset down beside them on the bed. Her eyes lingered on the fabric, and her fingers traced the lines engraved on it. “Kine would struggle to wear such a thing as tight, but, I am well versed in such attire. And we do not need to breathe; it is no concern.” With a grin, she crawled toward him, and nudged him onto his back again. Her body soon lay upon his, her breasts squished to his chest, and her kiss on his lips.

“Still, couldn’t have been comfortable,” he managed to say between kisses.

“It was to your delight, was it not?”

“It was! God damn, you looked… you look… you always look amazing, you know that.”

Chuckling, she set her lips to his earlobe again, and kissed it as she settled atop him. So much taller than him, she covered him almost completely, her legs between his own and her arms around him, elbows to the blankets.

“Such is the way of Daeva.” Another kiss. “But, are there are other reasons you visit my chambers, my love?”

Ah, fishing for compliments. In another context, it would have irritated him. But for the mighty Prince to be doing it, and so blatantly, made it both adorable and fun.

“Other reasons I come here. Well, I like that you’re scary and deadly,” he said. More chuckles. “I like that you’re smart.” Less chuckles, more satisfied purrs. “I like that you can play the cello.”

“Ah, the cello. One of the few skills I retained through the centuries.” She raised her head until she was looking down at him, long white hair spilling onto the bed next to his neck. “What else?”

“You’re introspective, and wise, and… and… delicate when you want to be, brutal when you need to be.”

Found what she was looking for. Her smile brightened, curling her cheeks more than he was used to seeing, and she lowered her head to put her lips against his once more.

“Come, let us bathe.”

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The shower again. They often took baths, but she had a really awesome shower, and he enjoyed it immensely. A large room connected to another room, one for changing, one for showering. No need to stay under a tiny shower jet here, hot water fell from almost the entire ceiling area along deep, sloped slabs of black above, so big and wide it was like walking under a waterfall. Black marble of course, with the cut holes above that held white LEDs.

Antoinette stepped under the falling water first, and he stared as she did. The wet hair, long and now slick to her spine, drew his gaze as she combed it back over her head with her fingers. Elbows up as she did, he stared at her breasts too; he was obsessed, and there was no denying it.

Kindred ejaculate was the same as dandruff or skin particles or hair, it all turned into the faintest hint of ash within five, sometimes ten minutes, once it was separated from the vampires body. They weren’t showering for that, they were showering cause Ashley and Julee were all over them. Which, Jack had to admit, was really hot.

Not fifteen minutes since you came four times in one night, with three women, and you’re already thinking about sex. Get a grip on yourself man.

Course, once he was looking at Antoinette again, his mind went right back to sex. The body, the long legs, the slim waist, wide hips. The huge breasts that weighed on her ribs. Such a perfect, defining example of a goddess, tall and curvy and strong.

Her makeup washed away as she rubbed an odd-looking cloth along her face, and let the water pull the colors into the drain. Beautiful, even as she exposed the pores and blemishes of her skin. Looked more real, less fantasy, now that he could see she had a tiny mole along her jaw line, the hint of a wrinkle along her forehead, and her skin was no longer perfectly uniform in color. Still so damn fucking beautiful.

“Jack? Ja—oh.” She caught his wandering eyes, smirked, and reached out to him to pull him under the water. The hot shower blasted his skin, and even with the blush of life off, he could still feel it warming him to the bone. “Dozens upon dozens of times you have shared my bed, little Ventrue. Dozens of times, you have climaxed within my body, upon my lips, my breasts. And yet your eyes stare with the same infatuation as the first night we spent together.”

“Sorry! Can’t help it, just… just….” Just damn, the love of your life is a total babe.

“Then I am delighted. Kindred are eternal, and our bodies unchanging.” She hugged him from behind, set his head along her sternum and her breasts against his shoulders. Water fell from her face onto him as she leaned over him. “Truly, sometimes I fear my height may dissuade you. Juvenile fears, I admit, but they come nonetheless.”

“Your height? I’m a little short guy.” And Beatrice teased him enough about it too. Well, everyone had, growing up. Nothing major or problematic, but enough teasing to make it a sore memory.

Antoinette laughed, and slid one of her hands down his body to tease along his abs and the leanness of his stomach.

“And yet, it is your small frame I wish between my legs.”

“… god I love your legs.”

This time her laughter erupted, and he blinked up at the queen of the night as she shook with the warm sound.

“Jack, my love, you are too sweet, and too sincere. And I love you for it.” Her hands reached out for some soap and a loofah, and once it was lathered, she ran it down his chest and long his arms.

She was washing him. He had to fight the urge to fall back against her and relax into her embrace. Maybe when they were in a tub, but not a good idea standing.

“Have you spoken with Damien yet?”

Damn.

“No, not yet.” Too busy chasing ghosts in a sewer.

“Please do. It is important.”

He nodded, and turned his head a bit as her soaping moved over his neck before down his chest again. No qualms about washing his sex or under it either. Well, she was half a millenium old, no reason to be shy about anything.

She got down onto a knee, and turned him around. He blinked down at her, at how the water fell atop her white hair and flattened it along her back, at how her hand worked the loofah up and down his legs, at everything. The Prince on her knee in front of him, as if it was a perfectly normal or natural thing for royalty to bathe him.

“Ashley and Julee,” he said, once he found the willpower to stop staring. “They uh, I know they go to university. But, what other sorts of things do they do?”

“Are you interested in them?” She looked up at him with a quirked brow. And maybe a bit more than that too, maybe a hint of jealousy.

“No, I was just curious. Julias has talked to me about ghouls, and how to turn someone into one, and… I dunno, part of it sounds a little tragic, you know? Addicted to Kindred blood, and slaves, and—”

She held up a finger, and stood. Uh oh. Too far. Abort!

But when she saw his panic, she sighed, and patted him on the head.

“Your concerns are justified. And there are Kindred who do abuse their ghouls, force the addiction upon them, turn them into slaves against their will. But do not worry for Ashley and Julee, they chose to become what they are. Ghouls do live for eternity, little Ventrue. As long as they taste a Kindred’s blood within a month as routine, they will remain ghouls, forever my pets, and friends.” Her hands reached down for his, and she put the loofah in his palm. “And for your first question, my ghouls live social lives. They enjoy education, and they enjoy artistic pursuits, when they are not with me. That is their life to enjoy, so that I may enjoy it through them.”

Oh. Oooooh. Well, now he felt like shit. From borderline accusing her of owning slaves one minute, to sympathy for her cruel world and how she never got to enjoy the simple things of life the next. He blinked down at the loofah in his hand, then up at her, loofah again, her again, before he stepped in and hugged her, cheek against her collar.

“Ah, little Ventrue?”

“… I love you, so damn much.”

Silence, at least for a few moments, with only the noise of the waterfall rain around them as Antoinette slowly returned the hug, and squeezed.

But after a few moments again, she took him by the shoulders, and pushed him away a foot.

“Come, clean your Prince.”

He smiled up at her, and pressed the loofah to her belly. Didn’t last long at the belly though, and his hand, as if possessed by some alien entity, guided the loofah up to her breasts. She laughed at him, and watched as he soaped up the valley between her breasts, up along the curve where they hung from her torso, and then underneath to soap up where they met her ribs. And again he pressed the loofah into the soft, heavy weight of her bosom, until one of them molded to conform against the loofah, before the weight slipped off his wrist and jiggled. So huge, so supple and cushy. Again, he soaped her large, dark nipples, and pressed his loofah into her breast to feel it give into his—

She bopped him on the head.

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~~Julias~~

He didn’t like this.

Him and his childe wore dark suits meant for foot work, and with pistols and knives holstered underneath their jackets; he was cool with all that. What he wasn’t cool with was going to see Damien.

“Can’t believe you let him live,” Julias said.

“Yeah, me neither.”

“Compassion could cost you your life here, kid.”

“Compassion’s also how you win allies, and break molds. And,” the kid pointed a finger at him, “correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re looking to break some molds. Or did I read you wrong, and you’re content with the way covenants are handling things here in Dolareido?”

Smartass. Julias frowned down at Jack, but frown turned to smile.

“I’d prefer we make changes on the backs of the ancillae and elders, not a neonate like yourself.”

“Yeah well, that’s why science advances one funeral at a time. Scientist’s motto. Old farts refuse to let things change, until they’re dead.” A shrug and smirk, Jack looked out the window of their drive at the passing sights. The car was taking them deeper into South Side, along the outskirts of Devil’s Corner.

Thinking of Devil’s Corner.

“So the woman just disappeared, hmm?” Julias said.

“Yes! Yes she did. I know it reads weird on the report, or whatever Jessy told you, but I’m telling you she disappeared.”

“Vanished.”

“Vanished!” Up went both hands. “We scanned that room thoroughly, every brick and pipe. Woman just vanished. And… and I’m telling you Julias, she wasn’t normal. I mean she looked normal, and she reacted with as much fear as you’d expect a human to, seeing a vampire for the first time. And I don’t know how she knew what we were! We weren’t doing anything remotely vampire-ish.”

That was peculiar. He rubbed his chin, looked out the opposite window, and watched the streetlights and people pass by. Hot weather, getting hotter every day; unusual for this time of year. The Kindred didn’t mind, but the kine did. And it did make everything smell of sweat and musk, which did all sorts of things to a Kindred’s senses. He didn’t look forward to a trip down into the abandoned subway.

A few miles later, Julias and Jack got out of the car in front of the subway entrance. People walked by, but no one went up or down the stairs that cut into the street. No reason to, the base of the stairs held thick metal doors, locked tight.

The two Kindred stepped down the stairway, stopped at the door, and unlocked it. The Invictus held all the keys, after all, and the old subway was no exception. They had a lot of Mekhet and Nosferatu who needed to get around, and that often called for a little stealth.

With the door locked behind them, they stepped out into the subway, and started to walk along the platform. The subway train was there, but empty, long abandoned; perfect for the Invictus to re-purpose. The power was on too, or at least whatever circuit the lights were on, and enough still worked to provide them a little light while Jack and Julias started the trip toward Damien. Assuming he’d be there.

He’d better be there.

“… so disappeared?”

“Yes!” Hands up again, waving about as he got enthusiastic trying proving his point. “Like, gone. Poof. Completely. If she had touched anything, the cobwebs everywhere would have given it away.”

“A short woman, curvy, long frizzy red hair.” He shrugged and hopped down onto the subway track. “I know of no Kindred that looks like that. You said she had a Scottish accent?”

“I think? Hard to tell from one word.”

“It’s enough to work with. Foreign accent, probably European, body description, and you’re sure she’s not human.”

“Very. I… it was a little startling. She wasn’t human, but I didn’t get a Kindred vibe from her. Just… just enough to… to make me weirded out, you know?”

Julias blinked, and looked down at Jack. The kid shuddered, rubbed his arms, and looked up and down, left and right, and over his shoulder. Scared. A little fear was good, it kept you alive, but for such a tame encounter to leave Jack still afraid was enough reason for Julias to take this more seriously. He’d already put Jessy on the case, but if Jack was still shook up like this, he better give her back up.

Back up. Normally that’d be him, or Natasha. How quickly that changed. The right hands of the council were down to only one in just a short window, and Natasha had joined a different covenant. And with Viktor dead, the upper echelon of the Invictus was down by two. They had to be careful moving forward, especially with the Carthians stirring up trouble.

“Hey, Julias. You’re doing it again.”

“Oh?”

“That thinking thing. I can see your eyes wandering on the ground the way they do when you’re thinking.”

He smirked at the kid, and motioned to the tracks. “Just watching my footing, jackass.”

Jack rolled his eyes, and hopped up onto the metal of the subway track. Like on tightrope, he stuck his hands out to the side and balanced as he walked.

“You really want to see him?” Julias said.

“Yeah. Been a couple weeks since the incident.” Kid shuddered and shook out his arms, like throwing away heavy weights. “I… guess I feel responsible. You saw what happened to him, after I… yeah.”

After you made him cut off his sire’s head.

“You don’t think he’ll just attack you on sight?”

“Antoinette said she and the sheriff had him locked up, but dropped him off down here when I said he could live. Far as I know, she told him it was my choice.”

Well, probably not only the kid’s choice, Julias was sure. Antoinette was in love with him, but she wasn’t stupid. There must have been another deciding element. Natasha, maybe? She’d been kidnapped by him after all, used as a hostage, and now a member of the Ordo Dracul. Her words must have meant a lot to Daniel.

Skittering. Both Kindred raised their heads to look down and into the shadows of the subway tunnel, and listened for the subtle scratches of rats and bugs against dirt, rocks, and concrete. There was light, but not much, not enough for him to feel comfortable on a stroll, especially now that he was a member of the council. He’d never thought of it before, of being afraid of simply walking around; he took and dealt his lumps fine as a right hand of the council. But as an actual member, he had a much bigger target on his back. God he missed having Natasha to watch it.

Or Beatrice.

Maybe he could recruit her? No, she’d never. Going from the Carthians to the Circle was a step in the opposite direction from the Invictus. Now she was dancing around bowls of bone, naked, filling them with blood and drawing blood symbols onto herself. He had no idea if that’s what members of the Circle of the Crone actually did, but that was the stereotype.

And it kind of fit her, he had to admit, with the massive crocodile teeth and the snake eyes, the tattoos and the visceral attitude. It’d be a dance he’d like to see someday.

The two Ventrue went deeper, down into the tunnels, and then down into more tunnels, and then down into more tunnels. The network of connections was beyond complicated, as the Prince and Viktor insured the tunnels were expanded beyond what was needed. For each tunnel made, two more were made that were never used, or explained to the general public. The joys of having Kindred run your city, with all the money to support the role; they turned its underground into a haven for creatures of the night.

The topside was a Kindred paradise as well of course, with the city’s blatant embrace of nearly every vice, often in large congregations of drug use, prostitution, and other sins that ranked low on the list. It made finding a meal easy, especially in the Invictus half of South Side, where people partied constantly, and no one bat an eye when someone else initiated sex in the dark corners of a dance club.

But not everyone had finding a meal so easy. And as Jack and Julias walked through the tunnels, they found them.

Nosferatu.

Not everyone with the cursed blood had disfigurements they could hide like Beatrice. Many were as damaged as Maria, but she was an elder, more than capable of hiding herself in plain sight with her obfuscate disciplines. These neonates could not.

One Kindred, wearing dreary, gray, stained robes over his body, was crouched into a high alcove of a platform. The waiting area had never been finished or set up with ticket gates or anything. Just a big, empty room where Kindred could gather. And as they walked by it, still on the subway tracks, Julias spotted a few more vampires hanging out in its shadows.

Another one stepped out from the black to peer at them, but once she recognized Julias, she gasped and stepped back into the black. He didn’t recognize her; must have been a Carthian. A huge growth covered half of her head and neck, tinted black. Another Kindred covered in a filthy sheet reached out to put a hand on her back, and offered Julias a harsh glare. Another man he didn’t recognize, one with six, long, dangling fingers, with odd curling claws on each tip. Given time, they would have the power to leave the sewers and tunnels, when they could hide in shadow in plain sight. Until then, they hid here.

There was no use in denying it; he found them ugly, and revolting. The thought of someone like Maria naked and in his bed made him want to vomit. Part of him hated himself for being that vain, but a part of him also accepted it as natural desire. How Lucas had loved Maria, physically, he could not understand. And he dare not ask.

Beatrice’s snake eyes, and the crocodile teeth instead of cheeks, were all interesting, and even sexy. Scary, but sexy. He doubted things would have gone so well between them if she’d had grotesque deformity. If a third arm had been growing out of her neck, or she had a giant mouth where her stomach was, that first night in the South Hill Cemetery crypt could have easily ended with him as dust.

Damn. Walking through the dark tunnels really made his mind wander. And as reflex, it drifted into self-loathing territory. But he smiled, and let images of Beatrice fill his mind instead. She’d tell him to accept the reality, get over it, and move on. Easier said than done, but it was nice to hear it anyway.

It took a little time to get to where they were told Damien was, a place Damien told the sheriff was one of his most common hideaways. An old monitoring room, supposedly, along the tunnel between Barker and Denver street. Sure enough, they found it, just a metal door up on a raised platform with some metal stairs to lead to it. A drawing of a spear had been carved into the metal, etched. Did Damien preach to the Nosferatu that hid in the tunnels and sewers? If there was any bloodclan that needed help finding a purpose in their second life, it was them.

Was that so wrong? Not like you can prove or disprove god, Julias.

Jack knocked.

Julias quirked a brow at him. “He’s forfeited his life, Jack. You don’t have to knock.”

“Don’t have to not.” He shrugged, and smirked at him. A nervous one though, with fidgeting fingers and glancing eyes.

“If he tries anything, I’ll deal with him.” Fast and brutal as Damien was, Julias was confident he could crush his mind, if it came to it.

The door opened.

Damien didn’t bother to say hello, or nod, or make eye contact. The man, haunched slightly and letting his arms dangle, sauntered back over to his corner, and sat down. In the dark. And dust. And rat shit.

“… Damien,” Jack said. No response. Jack looked to Julias, but he could only shrug, and motion for his childe to try again. “Damien.”

“I can hear you. What do you want?” The young man was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, each tattered and torn. Worn-out shoes, and head hanging between his knees completed the ensemble of a broken man.

Around him were the old computers and dials of the monitoring station. Pipes cut through the room, across the ceiling before coming down against the wall, and Damien made his home under one of the larger pipes. Water dripped into a puddle next to him, but the Kindred didn’t seem to notice.

He had a book in his hand, a large thing, black, a tome that Julias was sure held a plethora of ancient, dark things.

“Still reading the Book of Longinus?” Julias said.

Damien frowned up at him, and set the book down between his knees, against the damp floor. So much for a sacred object.

“I have read it a hundred times in my unlife, Invictus. I asked you a question, what do you want?”

Julias returned the frown, and made to step a little closer, but Jack put a hand up to his hip to stop him.

“Here to see you,” Jack said. Kid dug up enough courage to speak straight to the killer, but he was quivering a little, the beast inside him shaking. Julias could feel it, and Damien no doubt could too.

“… why?”

Shaking his shoulders out a little, Jack stepped in where Julias hadn’t, and squatted down in front of the killer.

“Because I let you live, and after what happened… guess… I feel a little responsible.” Jack said. Damien glared at the boy with enough venom to kill, but after a moment, lowered his gaze back down to the closed book in his hands, and said nothing. “And after what what happened, I feel… I—”

Damien raised his glare again, a bit of speed to the motion, enough to make Jack fall back and for Julias to reach for his pistol. But the Mekhet stopped, and turned away again. Fire one second, ice the next.

“I… assume the Prince told you I let you live?”

Damien said nothing.

“Just trying to extend an olive branch here, Damien. I saw the look in your eyes, you—”

“You know nothing about me.” Damien shook his head, picked up the tome, and threw it the floor. A bit closer to Julius, he could see it was ripped and torn, edges frayed, corners bent, and the damage looked recent.

“I was there, remember?” Jack, shivering and fidgeting, got in a little closer to the assassin. “Heard every word Lucas said, every word you said, every word Antoinette said. Give me a little credit Damien, I know you better than most.”

Julias blinked, and looked down at Jack as the silence settled. Damien didn’t throw back an insult or anything, but eased his head back until it was against the wet wall, and his unkempt hair fell over on his shoulder, half his head shaved smooth on one side, long hair dangling from the other. But no words.

“… the sheriff said you said you wouldn’t kill me, if he let you go. I appreciate that,” Jack said.

Damien choked on a quiet, bitter laugh, and fell back into silence.

Jack didn’t seem interested in the hint. “Everything that happened is on Lucas’s head. No one blames you for what happened, hell barely anyone knows. Natasha does, and she seems adamant that you can change.”

Natasha, that got something out of him, a flinch and a clench of a couple fingers. Damien took a deep breath and forced his eyes open to stare at Jack.

“You do not understand, Ventrue. I have had my beliefs taken from me. The Prince has banned the practice of the Second Estate, and my mentor and guide was a… a….”

“Well he wasn’t a fraud, if that’s what you were thinking.” Jack sat down next to Damien, and shrugged. “A zealot, sure, but I saw that attack on Antoinette much as anything. That sword disintegrated. Not exactly normal shit, you know?”

Julias smirked and took a step back. No use in interrupting the conversation, Jack had control. But seeing him in control was a bit of a shock, and Julias folded his arms across his chest as he slid his hand away from his pistol. Mostly.

When did Jack get so confident? Spending so many nights with the Prince, in her tower, with the sheriff nearby, could harden anyone he supposed. So could having slaughtered a group of Kindred using an enemy’s body. But seeing it with his own eyes was a little different, his childe sitting down — oh god the poor suit — next to an assassin, one who’d tried to kill him at that, with a sword through his gut. The kid had a way of talking that disarmed people, Julias always knew. What was different was, despite talking to a killer, his shivering was mostly gone, and the kid spoke with a solid voice, an ambassador’s voice.

“The sword, it… it tasted the blood of Malchus. Lucas held it long cherished, and… and destroyed it, to kill the Prince.”

“Malchus?” Jack said.

Damien turned to the boy sitting near him, and managed a small chuckle. “Read the Bible.”

“This thing? You have got to be shitting me, it’s bigger than a regular bible.” Jack reached out for the tome. Julias tensed as his childe picked it up, but Damien only watched with a raised brow.

“That is the Tome of Longinus. I meant the Christian Bible.”

“Ah, right.” Jack slipped his fingers along the dirtied pages. “You really are devout huh?”

“… I am.”

“And the Lancea et Sanctum, what’s your goal, your mission?”

Julias raised a finger to wipe away the growing grin. Kid really had a diplomatic side.

“The Sanctified seek to play a role, to fulfill our duty in God’s plan. He is the shepherd, kine are His sheep, and Kindred are the wolves. We hunt and kill the sheep who stray too far, and scare the others back into the warm embrace of the Lord. If Kindred are to ever be free of eternal damnation, the doom of hellfire, we must… do you even care?”

“Course I care, Damien. Last thing I want is for us to be enemies. I mean fucking hell, I didn’t want any of that to happen! And… and neither did you.” He closed the book, and put it onto Damien’s lap and chest. “Natasha saw it, and I saw it. Just today I was talking with Amanda, and she—”

“How is… Amanda?” Damien asked. A spark of warmth in his voice?

“Little shook up over bouncing between covenants, questioning her purpose in life, all the typical first-year university student stuff. Fine otherwise. Went out with her just last night.”

“I know.”

“You… you know?”

Damien nodded, and looked at the book back in his lap. “Little escapes my notice in the Devil’s Corner.”

Of course Damien would know, but the way he said it, sounded like he was watching them. Part of Julias could forgive him for spying, Mekhet did that as naturally as kine breathed, but part of him couldn’t. He stepped in closer, and squatted down in front of Damien.

“Jack may have let you live Damien, but no one has claimed sanctuary for you. Don’t—”

The man sighed and raised a hand, palm up and open. “I meant nothing by it, Julias Mire. I was investigating the disappearances in the Devil’s Corner, and noticed that Mister Terry and Miss Pol were doing the same.”

No secrets from a Mekhet. Julias nodded and stood, but kept his eye on the man as he took a couple steps back to give them room. His childe offered him a nod and shrug, but otherwise seemed unfazed by the threat Julias had just thrown at Damien.

“So you’ve seen the redhead?”

God damn it Jack. Don’t be so loose-tongued with everything.

“I have. There is something that connects her to the disappearances, but I do not know what it is.” Damien shrugged and smirked up at Julias, with just an edge of I-know-you-wish-I-didn’t-know-what-you-were-up-to in his eyes. “I have observed her from afar, but when I pursue her, she disappears.”

“Same.” The kid reached into his jacket, pulled out his smartphone, and started thumb-typing nice and quick. The joys of growing up in the digital age, taking notes took mere seconds. “Any ideas?”

“… you’re asking me for help?”

Jack lowered the phone. “Yeah. You don’t want to?”

It was Julias’s turn to smirk. Jack reaching out with more olive branches, and this time Damien would look the petty one if he didn’t comply.

“… she’s disappearing from within Devil’s Corner, but I don’t know how she’s doing it. And I know the underbelly of this city better than anyone.”

Julias looked out the doorway into the abandoned tunnels. “Better than anyone?”

Damien motioned to the door. “These are my tunnels. I knew you were coming. I decided to see what you had to say.” Another subtle smirk, but after a while it faded. “I’ll help, Jack. Natasha and the sheriff assure me you deserve it, and after what happened, I… yeah, I’ll help you.”

Likely story. But considering how the conversation was going, the Mekhet deserved the benefit of a doubt.

A sigh drew their eyes to Jack.

“Thanks,” he said. “I half expected you to try and fight us when we got here, or just not be here.”

“The thought had occurred to me.” From the shadows beside him, Damien pulled out a sword, a small thin thing like Viktor’s had been. More than strong and sharp enough to cut off limbs, Julias was sure. “But I… I was shown something that….” Tripping over his own words until Julias felt his grimace start to fade. “You killed my sire, Jack. Using my body.”

“… yeah.”

“But I now know it was necessary.” He shook his head some more, put the sword down, and cracked the black bible open. “So forgive me, if I still have the impulse desire to cut your head off. I know it is because of the Arch… Lucas’s false teachings. Fifty years I spent coveting them, just a fledgling at first and younger than you when Lucas and I disappeared into the sewers come the purge.”

Jack’s jaw fell. “… wait, what?”

“I wandered the city underbelly for fifty years, Jack, with my sire sleeping and all the other bishops dead and the covenant scattered and ash. I read this, and… and fell on Lucas’s words more than what I could gleam from this.” Eyes broken, Damien raised the book and held it in front of him. “And his sermons were… more than a little biased, and manipulative. No wonder the Prince unleashed the purge upon us. Lucas was… was… a monster, a vile man.”

The air turned to ice. Damien was trying to smile, or at least maintain some sort of composure, but his head fell, and his shoulders shook a little as he struggled with it. Struggled with having a monster for a sire. Struggled with the brainwashing of your master, your mentor, the person you think you can trust the most only to realize far too late they’re not trustworthy at all.

God fucking damn it. Viktor. The parallel was nauseating.

“… I’ll talk to the Prince,” Julias said, “about the Lancea et Sanctum.” The two men looked up at him, as surprised as him, but he shrugged and offered his Ventrue smile. “You’re not Lucas. Your covenant deserves a chance if they have a new bishop, someone who doesn’t think killing other Kindred with differing beliefs is proper recourse.” He squatted down in front of the smaller man, and glared down at him. “And you don’t think that, right?”

“… no, I don’t. But you have only my word.”

“Natasha vouches for you. Jack vouches for you. It’s enough reason for me to bring it up to the Primogen.” Especially considering Jack had been in the man’s mind. He’d controlled him, turned him into a puppet, butchered his congregation and killed his sire using the man’s body. Jack was too trusting, but after all that, Julias had no choice but to take his childe’s recommendation seriously. Julias wouldn’t have trusted him, and he could tell it was the Danse Macabre making him paranoid already.

Paranoid, or just smart, Julias? Trusting this man could mean your death, and Jack’s thereafter.

“I… I don’t know if… lead the Lancea et Sanctum? The Second Estate? I’m barely a bishop, just a—”

It was Julias’s turn to raise his hand, and shut the man up.

“A devout man of god, a believer of the message of Longinus, and the childe of the previous Archbishop. I can think of no one better to write the wrongs of your sire. Can you?” He stared the man down, glared at him with the weight and gravitas etched onto his face. His best Ventrue face, the face he took when crushing the will of others, molding them to his. At least Viktor had taught him something useful.

Damien stared at him, eyebrows furrowed but eyes open and considering. “I… I would have no congregation.”

“Baby steps. Let me talk to the Primogen first and see if the Prince allows any of this,” Julias said.

Jack raised a hand. “Should I mention it to her?”

“No.” Probably a bad idea to bring political affairs into Jack’s bedroom. “Let me handle it.”

“… the Lancea et Sanctum… allowed to practice once again in Dolareido.” The man smiled, and let his spine relax against the wall behind him. “The irony.”

“You don’t want to?” Jack said.

“I would love to. I would… love to speak of Longinus to those who would listen once more. But I fear the wrath of the Prince. I did much to offend her.”

The little Ventrue stood up and tried to wipe off his pants, to no avail. “Lucas offended her. She blames him, not you. But she does have a hate-on for the Lancea et Sanctum. You’ve got your work cut out for you Damien if you want to try and change that image.” Jack turned to Julias and smirked up at him. “You too, if you’re going to convince her of this at all.”

“Maria will be glad for the return, at least,” Julias said as he stood up. “Speaking of, has she spoken to you at all, Damien?”

“No. I… I do not know what she would say, nor would I.”

“She’ll… she’ll be around eventually, but it may be best if you just let her say her piece.”

Damien stood as well, looked down at his tome, wiped off some of the floor water, and looked up at him with a strange, subtle smile.

“I’ve survived a long time in this city, Mister Mire. I can handle myself, in many ways.”

“Good. I’m putting the Invictus out on a ledge here, bringing this up to Primogen. The First Estate seeking to support the Second Estate? It’s a song they’ve heard before, and I’ll have to work to convince them it’s benign.” If it was benign.

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Maria’s home, if it could be called that.

The Grand Cathedral of Dolareido. Gothic was not strong enough a word for the towering monolith of old windows, spiked towers, and enormous archways showing statues of angels. Not sweet little cherubs, but real angels, with swords and shields, with six wings, with eyes that cut into your heart. The church Lucas had commissioned long ago when Julias was still kine. Commissioned wasn’t the right word, more like, coerced the populace into making a proper cathedral for the faith.

He’d manipulated the kine for his purpose, without talking to the Prince about it first. That’d been the start of the trouble.

Julias closed the car door behind him and waved off his driver, before he started the walk up the stairs toward the beast of a building. No denying it, it was a majestic and imposing edifice. Every inch he came closer, he could feel the eyes of the gargoyles on the high ledges staring down at him, the glare of the angels baring his soul, and the angry demons that held up the pedestals the angels stood upon glared with just as much malice. The crucifix upon the archway, the doves carved into the stone of the pillars, every step he made up the stairs made him feel like he shouldn’t be here. Like a vampire shouldn’t be here.

He opened the giant doors, massive and heavy, and stepped into the nave of the church.

The church had stopped seeing use since Lucas’s disappearance fifty years ago, and police kept loiterers from breaking into the church come nightfall, at Maria’s request; no one wants their bed covered in graffiti. Not that people liked to hang out at the Dolareido Cathedral in the dark, as close to the Three Kings Cemetery as it was.

The sound of the organ greeted him, a powerful sound that almost shook the walls. Thick walls kept the sound from escaping beyond the vast empty gardens that surrounded the cathedral. A perfect place for someone who liked being alone, for someone who believed in god, for someone who loved Lucas.

He walked up the aisle toward the dais, the podium, the lectern that sat upon it, and the bible upon that. The apse back end of the giant, tall nave held the organ, and a magnificent one at that, with pipes big enough to crush the pews behind him if they fell. And someone was playing them.

There was only a little light, just a few lit candles on the railings and such near the ghost woman, just enough for her to see as she danced her fingers up and down the complicated instrument. Some old Gothic piece to go with the Gothic church that made him feel like he was living in a time from hundreds of years ago.

“Mister Mire,” she said.

“Madam Turio.” He walked up to join her, stood beside her and looked down as her fingers worked along the various levels of the pipe organ’s keys. Her feet too had keys to play, deep notes that Julias could feel in his bones when the sound filled the enormous room.

Beside the little woman, a glass of red was set upon a small wooden table, something for her to drink while she played no doubt. The instrument was glorious, a shine of ivory keys with silver-looking pipes. The pipes themselves bore statues of angels and demons, again with angels standing upon their prostrated bodies, many with swords drawn.

The music was very complex, but he didn’t recognize it.

“A piece by Louis Verne, Mister Mire.” She glanced over her shoulder at him, but continued to play, with each note driving home a harmonic sea of pain and sadness. But her voice was deadpan. “Why have you come?”

The corpse woman, with her small body, her long black hair, her white dress, the scarred and crinkled skin, the cold, almost invisible mist that fell from body, it all gave him chills. It was probably random sightings of Maria that stirred the rumors Three Kings Cemetery was haunted. But he’d gotten used to her, dealing with her for so long. Mostly. The raspy, dead-girl voice sent a shiver down his spine every time.

“I wanted to talk about Damien, and Natasha.”

She stopped playing.

“… why?”

“Because you owe it to me.”

The ghost woman turned her head to stare up at him, and he had to fight the urge to grimace. A corpse, someone who’d died from thirst, had their skin cut on, maybe drowned. Chills.

“… you grow more like Viktor every day.” Sighing, she turned back to the organ, the dozens of white keys, and the large wood-colored console that held them. “Speak quickly.”

Like Viktor? He could feel the bad mood crawling up his leg.

“You let Lucas take Natasha hostage.”

“Lucas assured me she would be safe. Lo and behold, she lives.”

Not good enough. He leaned in and set a hand on the organ console.

“She could have died, easily, and you know it. It was a kamikaze attack on the Prince’s tower, and you let it happen.”

With her black hair hanging over her cheeks and down over her chest, he couldn’t see her face with her head turned to the organ, but he could see her twitch.

“It wasn’t supposed to be a kamikaze attack. The Prince was to die, the sheriff too, and Madam Vola was to live. Lucas wasn’t… he wasn’t… supposed to die.” Her shoulder started to shake, just a little, a subtle thing that he wasn’t used to seeing on her. No stone face, no cold ice gaze, the typical council act.

Damn it.

“You really loved him, didn’t you?”

“… yes.” For a moment, there was silence, and stillness. But the organ erupted into noise as she slammed both her hands down on the keys. “And I was ecstatic he’d returned from his slumber. I thought he had somehow left the city. I didn’t realize he was in hiding until his childe….” Another sigh, and her shoulders slumped as she leaned forward so her hair fell over the keys. “Madam Vola is better off with the Ordo Dracul.”

He blinked, and stared. Where was the ice, the cold glare, the bone-chilling death that normally radiated from her? Just a few minutes of conversation and his vision of her shattered.

She was sad.

“If I had known about Daniel and Natasha—”

“You didn’t know Daniel was her sire?”

“I had my suspicions, but the Prince avoided a direct response when I asked her, long ago when Natasha fell into the Invictus embrace.” With a deep sigh, she started playing Moonlight Sonata, gentle on the keys. So cliche, and yet so perfect for the ghost woman. And Julias did love a good cliche. “If I had known, I would never have taken her under my wing.”

“She wasn’t involved in the purge, Maria.” Forget the titles. “Far as I know, at that time she was just a fledgling, and Daniel’s little secret. You have no reason to hate her.”

“And yet I gave her to Lucas, knowing full well whether my love… whether the Archbishop succeeded or failed, Natasha would leave. And I would do it again.” Her fingers continued to play, despite her head slumping and her hair shifting over the keys.

He gave his own sigh, and shook his head. “Lucas was a dangerous man, Maria. And violent.”

“He was. I had asked him once, to stop pushing against the Prince so hard, but… but it only spurned him on.” She peeked up at him from behind her black hair. How quick her corpse features reminded him she wasn’t a gentle little girl, despite her words. “Over the years, I saw him deteriorate, as Viktor did.”

“And yet when he came back, you let him have Natasha?”

“I wanted him back!” Her voice punched through the melancholy melody of the song, but she didn’t stop playing, or break the mournful rhythm. “I wanted… the Prince and the sheriff dead. The Lancea et Sanctum did not deserve the purge.”

“Maybe they didn’t. A lot of bishops, a lot of Kindred died. But Lucas was the most violent of them all, Maria.” Careful Julias.

“… he was.” Her eyes fell back to the keys. Silence but for the song, for several minutes.

“… and Damien?” he said.

“What about him?”

“He’s Lucas’s childe.”

“I’ve never spoken with him. He is a stranger to me.”

Well, no love there. No pulling on that heartstring.

“I have. He’s an intelligent man, and a strong believer in the Testament of Longinus, as you are,” he said. She stopped playing, and let the vibrations of the sound dissipate along the cathedral walls. But said nothing. At least she was listening. “And unlike Lucas, he’s willing to cooperate with the Prince.”

“… what are you getting at, Julias?”

“I talked to him, and he’s willing to bring back the Second Estate.”

She raised her head and looked at him, back straightening. “Public practice of the faith of Longinus? The Prince would never allow it.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The Prince had issues with Lucas, and for good reason.” Every time he insulted Lucas, the little corpse woman flinched. He was playing with fire, but he had to drive home that Lucas was a violent, horrible man. She already knew it, but she wasn’t internalizing it.

“What do you plan to do?”

“I’m going to bring it up at the next Primogen meeting.”

She snarled and looked back to the keys of the grand organ, before she started playing something with a little more darkness to it. Bach.

“It will be as it was before, the First Estate attempting to justify the Second Estate. The Prince alone will fight to prevent it, let alone Jacob and Garry.”

“Things are different this time. Viktor isn’t trying to shove an agenda down their throat, and it won’t be Lucas leading the Lancea et Sanctum, it’ll be Damien.”

“You said the boy is but fifty years embraced? Hardly an appropriate age for an Archbishop.”

“I think Bishop will be enough of a title for now. Give it a hundred years and when he’s old enough to be a true member of the Primogen, he can have that power, assuming the nearby city bishops recognize him.” Giving her a smirk and a nod, he reached out to start tapping keys on the organ. “Besides, not all of us are as old as our station demands.”

She slapped his hand, hard, and returned his smirk.

“Perhaps, but Viktor fostered your growth for that time, Julias. Who is Damien? What do we know of him? The others were as surprised by the developments as us, that this boy had been hiding under our noses for half a century. Skilled, but unknown.”

“The Prince let him live. He must have made an impression.” Steel face, don’t let her know what you know. “I went to talk to him not long ago, and was surprised, Maria. He’s devout, a good man, just a… a broken man, right now. “

“The Dark Prophet would laugh at your description.” And she did too, her raspy voice coming out in tiny chuckles that sounded more like quiet, dying gasps. “Perhaps… perhaps it is time for a change. I would like to see this boy before I agree to this proposal though.”

A risk that Maria would find out Jack killed Lucas, not the Prince, but that risk was unavoidable either way. Trust Damien. Hard to do, even after having that conversation with him. If anyone misspoke, it’d be Jack’s head on a plate. Or worse, Maria would lock him up in the depths of the Cathedral, and torture him with her Nosferatu disciplines.

Steel face.

“I will visit him soon and tell him you wish to speak to him,” he said.

“Please do. I will interrogate Lucas’s childe, and I will see if he’s worthy to bear the title of his sire.”

Julias did not envy the man.

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~~Natasha~~

You can do this. You can do this. You can do this.

Chanting a mantra wasn’t helping much, and the closer she got to the front door of the Elysium Tower, the more she felt herself shaking. The more she felt like people were staring at her, when she knew they weren’t. The more she felt like eyes were on her, dark hidden eyes, when she knew they weren’t. The more she felt like something was crawling up her leg, even though she was damn sure something wasn’t.

She was wearing a gray suit, open jacket with a black shirt and shoes. Business casual, sort of. Jessy had assured her she looked cute as a button, but also ready for her first day as a member of the Ordo Dracul.

Jessy. She hadn’t told her best friend what Maria had done, afraid it might put Jessy in a bad position. But, she was bound to find out sooner or later, and the longer Natasha put it off, the worse it was going to be. The harder it was going to make being her friend. Just telling her she’d joined the Ordo Dracul had been tough enough.

Mind racing, eyes unfocused, hands fidgeting, all the classic signs of anxiety. Just another day in her life, just another day for Natasha Vola, just another day being turned upside down.

She stepped into the garden of the Elysium Tower, and looked around through the curving walls of stone that were the garden maze. The benches were stone too, and stone vines curled and connected them with the walkway and walls. Bushes and trees dotted the garden, and within its walls many young Kindred grew familiar with their new lives as vampires. New being relative; some of the Kindred were several years old, and still struggled with the reality that they were now immortal, and blood leeches. In the Elysium district, where no Kindred feeding or violence was allowed, the young vampires—

Focus, Natasha! It’s just your sire. Your sire. You knew him before he sired you, a quiet man who knew a lot about books. You talked to him in the university library, remember? He had a soft voice, and he gave the littlest smiles when you asked him questions about Twain and Hemingway.

And Antoinette? The Prince? So tall, so utterly tall compared to her. The French seductress was well over six feet tall, while Natasha was a four eleven on a good day; just being around her made Natasha feel like an ant.

Voivode. An Ordo Dracul title, and it alone was enough to make her shiver on top of her quivering. But the Prince had never been anything but nice to her, and Daniel had been nice… if insistent, in his passive aggressive stops-talking-the-moment-you-argue sort of way.

She could handle the two of them, at least enough for conversation. It was the secrets deep in the tower she was afraid of.

She stood before the glass building, and started up the steps. The lobby awaited her, and she grimaced as she looked around at the glass walls of her new place of work; one mistake and she’d be fried in the sunlight. But the Prince assured her that was basically impossible, so she shook off her shivers, and came up to the receptionist. A heavy, balding fellow named Chunk. How drôle.

Oh god she better not make a French joke around the Prince by accident.

“Hello,” she said.

“Oh hello there Miss Vola. You can take the stairway in the back down. You could take the VIP elevator in the back there too, but that’ll take you down to the bottom floor, past the Prince’s research floors.”

Research floors. Gentle way to put it.

“Thank you.” With a nod and a fake smile, she started down the lobby, past the normal elevators, and toward the stairway in the back.

She didn’t get far before she ran into Daniel.

“Sire,” she said, looking up at him, doing her best to not break eye contact.

The man raised a gloved finger to his glasses, pressed on the nose ridge, and offered her a small smile.

“Childe.”

“… Illuminus of the Void, K-Kr—”

He raised a hand and shook his head. “Just call me Daniel, Natasha, when we’re alone. Sire when we’re with the Prince is fine.”

First name basis it was then, when alone. Common titles when together. Had the Prince softened in the past half a century?

“What should I c-call the Prince?”

“Master. Or Prince.” A nod and a small dismissing wave of his fingers. “Or Voivode, if you prefer.”

Voivode made her think dark thoughts. Prince was better.

Daniel turned and started to walk down the stairs into the dark tower, but after taking a couple feet, he peeked over his shoulder at her, and waited. A change from the past, where he would have kept walking and expected her to follow. Had he softened too? Or was he going easy on her because of the nastiness with the Lancea et Sanctum and Lucas a couple weeks ago?

She could use a little softness for her first steps back into the Coils of the Dragon.

The two of them made their way down the stairs, and she looked around at the deep hallway she was moving down. Jack had spoken to her before of the black marble, and how much the Prince enjoyed it. It’d been a vague memory for her from so long ago, but it all came back to her as she smiled at the cracks of white veins, like lightning across the obsidian surfaces. She enjoyed the decor, much as it frightened her.

They turned into a hallway, and she frowned as she noticed the scratches along the walls. Some of the repairs weren’t complete then, and bullets ricocheting down the halls had left damage. The flash memories of gunfire made her shivering worse, trapped in Lucas’s grasp while a sortee of Kindred with guns unloaded ammunition upon the Prince. And then of course, the Prince ripping several of them to literal bits with her bare hands.

Natasha wasn’t a stranger to violence. And when push came to shove, she knew she could handle it. Putting a bullet through Damien’s skull just one example. But the sight of Kindred becoming an angry mob, and the following act of carnage and brutality, still made her stomach turn.

The two vampires walked down the hall, past the LED lights from carved holes above in the marble, past the quiet humming vents, past the various doors, before stopping at one particular door. She remembered this one, and she hesitated as Daniel reached out to open it.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, voice calm, face deadpan like always.

“Easy… for you t-t-to say, you… you’re….” You’re hundreds of years old and are comfortable with this insanity.

“You are not the child you once were, Natasha. And I… perhaps a little different as well?” He managed a slight raise of the brow, caught between question and statement.

Natasha had no choice but to smile at his sad attempt at persuasion. Cute, adorable even, but horrible.

He opened the door, and the two stepped into the wyrm’s nest.

A giant room, tall but especially wide, and round. The walls were covered in white dragons painted onto the black marble, and a chandelier of crystal hung from above, a giant thing to match the giant room. The chandelier was lit with blue flame. How it made blue flame, if blue flame was toxic, if it was magical or scientific, she had no idea. But it was damn beautiful.

Perhaps more beautiful, or frightening, was the floor of the room. Upon the center, a white circle perhaps fifty feet wide was drawn, lines thick and arranged in patterns. Many, many patterns. As if someone obsessed with trigonometry had had too much caffeine and decided to draw every symbol they knew. Spirals, stars, pentagrams, cascading shapes of different sizes, to the point it was like trying to identify shapes in the stars.

Just being near it was enough to get her shaking again.

The Prince was standing by the circle. In front of her she held a large tablet, and beside her was a grand, half-circle desk covered in laptops and many objects Natasha did not recognize. As her eyes lingered on them, she winced as she realized one of the objects was a shrunken head. Other things on the desk also looked like shrunken body parts, fingers and hands. Some seemed attached to dolls that looked like dried-up humans, others attached to wood carvings like bowls. There were tied bags that looked like they were made of skin, and from within them stuck out bones that looked like they belonged on birds. Some feathers and sticks stuck out from the bags too, arranged deliberately.

“Miss Vola, how delightful to see you.” The Prince set the tablet down on the table, walked up to her, and reached out with a single hand to touch her shoulder. A light touch, momentary, before she pulled it away. “I am glad you have returned to us.”

“I am as well… my P-P-Prince.” Miss Vola, not the Invictus title Madam Vola, but a regular way of saying a woman’s last name. She had decades of habits to change.

“We are colleagues, Miss Vola. Prince is fine, no need for my.”

Yeap, she’d definitely softened in the past fifty years. Or maybe since she’d starting dating Jack?

“Yes… P-Prince.”

Antoinette chuckled, and reached over her shoulder to comb her white hair for a moment, before she turned back to the table before her.

“As you know Miss Vola, we are few in number here in Dolareido. I may be Prince, but I have not let the Kindred run rampant, nor do I wish for our order to become… mainstream, as my Jack would say. There is much to be said for fostering refinement and an eye for subtlety, for detail.” The Prince started to circle the table, walking around it with her tablet up, taking pictures and jotting notes. “And such a keen eye is lost, I find, when swimming in swaths of colleagues. Objectivity is destroyed, and keeping an open mind not long thereafter.”

Natasha froze. There was a but coming up. Where was the but, what was the but.

“But… I agree with Daniel. It is time for a change. With Lucas gone, as well as Viktor and Tony, perhaps I can stand to be more welcoming to newcomers, to those interested in the secrets of the order.” A sly smile and a small gesture with her hand to Natasha followed. “Or welcoming back those that left before.”

Oh. Maybe she was bitter about Natasha having left the order.

“I… I must apologize, Prince, for leaving! I… I had t-t-t-t-to… get away from….” Try as she might to not look at them, Natasha found her eyes stuck on the disgusting things on the table. Some of them had eyes! Little beady eyes that stared at her no matter where she moved.

“And that was our failing, Miss Vola. Do not worry, neither I nor your sire blame you for leaving. We introduced you to the secrets of the realm before we should have. But, you are much older now, are you not Miss Vola?”

She was older, much older. Half a century under her belt as a Kindred, and a lot of sights. A lot of things, a lot of misery and pain, a lot of victories and money. Stronger, faster, not necessarily braver.

But she could try to be, right?

“… what would you have me d-do, Prince? Sire?”

Daniel made his little smile, and the Prince mirrored it.

“For now, observe. There is power here in this room, Miss Vola, power of a sort beyond the simple understandings of science. Other members of the Ordo Dracul would perhaps say it is an act of god. But I know otherwise, little Mekhet. We shall explore these realms, you and I, and dip our toes into rivers sacred and forbidden, until secrets from the nether fill our minds. No mystery unexposed, no enigma we have not scrutinized.”

Natasha could already feel the tremors come back, the shaking in her knees that vibrated up into her skull. The dead heart in her chest felt like it wanted to beat, just so it could burst. Why did the Prince have to make such a grand show of this sort of stuff, this mystical insanity?

Daniel raised a hand, and walked over to stand beside the taller woman.

“Prince, perhaps we should… ease her into this anyway?”

The Prince lowered her hands. Probably didn’t even realize she’d started gesturing, like speaking to a crowd.

“My apologies Miss Vola. Needless to say, the studies of the occult fascinate me, and every night I am excited to see what arcane knowledge I can gleam. And I am excited that you are here to help, as my time is fought for from many directions; some I enjoy sharing it with, some I do not.” She smiled, a mischievous smirk fit for a succubus. Definitely enjoyed sharing her time with Jack.

Trying to picture the little guy with the tall vixen was just impossible. Not that Natasha was one to talk, being so much shorter than an already short guy. Still, looking up at Antoinette made her mind wander, picturing the small, fit kid between her huge breasts.

Oh god she was turning into Jessy. She needed new friends.

“P-Prince, it’s… I… it fascinates me too. And scares me.”

“Fear will take you far in this life, Miss Vola. Too much, or too little, and you are either paralyzed or dead.” Or both; it didn’t need to be said. “But with a proper amount, you will be cautious and observant. Take this, for example.” She set her tablet down on the table, and reached out for the shrunken head. No qualms about touching the dead flesh, the wrinkly skin or the old, frayed hair. “The Jivaro of Ecuador and Peru, famous for their practice of head shrinking. Again, mainstream. Now the power of this act, the implication, the belief of it, has lost weight. Wherever you go where the odd and peculiar are sold, fake bobbles next to fake shrunken heads rest.” She walked toward Natasha, and held out the small thing on her palms, seated so it was looking at her straight on. “To find a real one is difficult. To find a real one, made from a human, on the night of a full moon, of the chief of a tribe, with a Kindred soaking the head in his own vitae during the ritual? There is but one, and this is it.”

Natasha gulped on nothing, and stared at the little thing. Quite the resume.

“I uh… um… what’s special about it?” Other than its impressive and traumatizing history.

“Touch it.”

Oh god damn it.

The little Mekhet reached out, fingers quivering and arm shaking, and touched the thing’s forehead. Immediate jolts of something cold hit her, something colder than room temperature would suggest, like prickly bits of ice. The head sat there, eyes closed, sewn lips unmoving. Her imagination ran away with her, made her imagine it opening its eyes, or trying to speak through the sewn lips, but it remained lifeless. But the touch was real, as if electricity had been reborn as a dead spark, and danced against where her fingertips touched the thing’s ruined skin.

Intriguing and terrifying.

“Is it not?” the Prince said.

Natasha opened her eyes wide and looked up at her. No, not reading her mind. Natasha just wore her expressions on her face, and the Prince was good at reading people in general.

Now that she thought about it, she’d never talked with the Prince one on one, not really, not even when she was a member of the Ordo Dracul, protege of mentor Daniel. The Prince was talking to her like a proper colleague. What changed? The fifty years embraced, maybe?

“So it’s uh… m-magical?” she said.

“Magic is a horrible word, Miss Vola. There are secrets to the world we do not understand. Hidden things, machines of divine scale, realms that run the currents of many realities, lying on the edges of our own. In the Ordo Dracul, some of us hunt secrets of the flesh, others the mind, others the world. And I hunt the secrets of the worlds beyond.” The Prince walked into the heart of the circle, and placed the tiny head upon its center. “Energies, not magic. If we view them as things beyond understanding, we will never understand them.”

Made sense. And she did want to understand how people like Lucas were able to call upon lightning. The disciplines of the Kindred were odd enough, but after enough time, she’d grown to view them as nothing more than aspects of her race, evolved predators. A bolt of lightning though? That was eye opening.

“Is that what this room is for?” Natasha said. “Finding secrets?”

“Indeed.” Antoinette walked to the wall by the door, closed it, and reached over to the dial to dim the lights. The white LEDs faded away, until there was only the gentle blue glow of the chandelier fires above. “For today, you are to observe, and become familiar with the process.”

What sort of process did one use for analyzing the occult and the mystical elements involved? Like asking someone who’s been blind their whole life to describe color. But sure enough, Antoinette got the tablet again, and started to film the shrunken head.

Or at least, Natasha thought she was just filming it. But as the little Mekhet stepped closer, she realized the Prince wasn’t using a common tablet. No brand on it, and it was very thick. She got around onto Antoinette’s side, and looked through the picture being shown on the weird device.

“… infrared?” she said. The picture did look different from what she was seeing with her naked eyes. Lot of orange.

“No Miss Vola, but you are close.” The Prince smiled at her and returned to the picture. She lowered it too, enough so Natasha didn’t have to crane her neck to see. “Watch closely.”

After a glance to Daniel to catch his nod, she set her eyes on the device, and watched the tiny head sit in the circle center. It just sat there of course, lifeless, because that’s what dead things did. The irony.

Motion on the picture made her gasp, and she leaned in closer to stare harder at the picture. There was movement! Tiny, little wisps of color, a glint of blue mist that drifted with invisible currents. She snapped her head up to look over the device at the shrunken head, and where it sat upon the grand symbol. Nothing, just the quiet blue light from the odd chandelier above. But when she looked back at the tablet to watch the feed, she gasped again at the faintest wisp of moving blue against an otherwise very dark, orange-tinted image.

The wisps started to make a shape. Eyes glued to the screen, Natasha got closer until she was right next to the Prince, but she barely noticed. The wisp of blue was making an actual shape, a thing, something that stood on two legs. A person! A ghostly image against the orange background of the tablet’s image, the blue shadow gestured, or at least looked like it did. Natasha could see what seemed like a head, legs, and arms, but no features, no eyes or fingers or toes. Still, with a few more minutes of staring, the image settled into something that did indeed seem human, and it started to walk around.

It came toward them. Natasha squeaked and jumped back, but the ghost thing didn’t react. It turned around and back toward the circle center, and proceeded to pace around within it.

“… is… is it-t-t trapped?”

“Yes, but not by the circle. Whatever it is, it is bound to the head.”

Chuckling, the Prince handed her the tablet. It was heavy, and thick. Expensive. Whatever technology the Prince had put into its development was not normal, not something the Invictus had, and probably not something any kine-run organization had. And, Natasha had to admit, there was a thrill to having a fortune at her back to fuel her new covenant’s interests. The Invictus had money, but all they ever did with it was make more money, and vie for positions of power, to make more money. With the Ordo Dracul, they had a purpose.

But the purpose was terrifying. She could see a thing, an actual, real ghost thing, blue against the orange of the screen. Maybe blue because of the strange chandelier?

“D-do you know what it is?” she said. “… who it is?”

“I do not. Communication has been difficult. It does not see us or hear us. At least, not until I do this.” The Prince reached out over the table of occult objects, grabbed a small, brown, flannel bag on a string, and hung it around her neck.

“What’s in that?”

“The bones of children, and the dust of graveyards. The cloth is a burial shroud.”

“… w-w-what?”

The Prince nodded, and stepped into the circle. “This charm was made a millenium ago.”

Oh, not of her own making then. Good. Well, don’t put it past the Prince to do something that gross in the pursuit of secrets either.

The white-haired woman walked up toward the shrunken head, and stood before it. As she did, the blue figure in the screen reacted, stepping aside to avoid touching her when she came before the head. It circled her, reached out to touch her, but its arms went through her body and found nothing. It tried again, but the ghost thing was slow to do anything, and each gesture and movement took many seconds.

But it did react to her, specifically her and her location. It wasn’t just a weird movie on playback, or some afterimage of… something. Whatever it was, it was aware of her.

“It-t-t… it can see you?” You sound like straight out of a horror movie, Natasha.

“Or sense me. But it does not respond to my words, or my gestures. Only my location. And only if I am wearing the witch’s charm.”

Witch’s charm? Oh god what crazy world had she let herself get pulled into. Just as she started shivering again, Daniel put a hand on her shoulder. He too was looking at the screen, and despite his glasses and deadpan face, she could see the same hint of intrigue there she knew she was wearing too; just without a bunch of a fear mixed in.

They were staring at something beyond the realm of the physical. There was a real, existing thing, moving and reacting to Antoinette as she walked around in the circle. Real. It was real.

Her knees started to rattle, and Daniel gave her a little shake of his own. A nod and small smile from him, and back to the display.

“Hidden things that Mekhet disciplines cannot see.” Daniel let go of her and walked toward the table, where his gloved hands drifted over the many objects and items. “Just a handful of the strange objects we’ve collected over the centuries. Other members of the order have given them to us, hoping we can discover more about them. A daunting task, but we’ve been diligent.”

Natasha raised a brow. Her sire, talking, for more than two sentences. He did that rarely.

“Tell me Miss Vola, what did you observe?” The Prince left the circle, returned the shrunken head and necklace charm to the table, and turned the lights back on.

Natasha looked back down at the tablet in her hand, and aimed it at the circle once more. Without the shrunken head or the dim blue light, all the screen showed was what her eyes could see.

“… whatever that was, it-t… it didn’t leave the circle. And when you put the shrunken head down, it t-t-took time to appear.” She looked back to the circle, then to the Prince. She wanted more. “It reacted-d to you only when wearing the charm, and it tried to touch you. It… it only appeared through whatever wave spectrum this device is listening for, and only when the only light visible was from the chand-d-d… d-delier. The… thing, was the color of the blue fire, despite the filter on this device being very orange. So the d-d-device was filtering for something that only the blue light can expose. But I cannot t-tell if the symbol on the floor is… relevant.”

Tough, to talk that much. Each stutter was an annoyance, each pause an embarrassment. But the Prince waited, nodding with each statement, patient.

“A thorough breakdown to be given in such a short time. Excellent. That is what we need, what I need, in a new member of the Ordo Dracul. I cannot abide Kindred throwing subjectivity and bias into their analyses.”

“B-bias?”

“Yes. Can you imagine the sort of drivel I would have to contend with if your friend Miss Herrington were asked to make an objective report of what she saw?”

Natasha giggled, and swung a hand up to her mouth to cover it. Probably something along the lines of ‘blue ghost thing danced around the Prince and tried to cop a feel’.

“Do you have the gift of spirit touch, Miss Vola?”

“Spirit touch? You mean, see an ob-bject’s past? Secrets? No. Sire can, and Damien can, but it isn’t a skill I’ve learned.” It came easier to some Kindred, but never her. She wanted to see things clearly, and her brain just didn’t like the vague imagery of what the auspex showed.

“Just as well, such images can be misleading. And your sire explains that you have an unnatural talent for clear sight, even in the darkest corners?”

“I d-do… Prince. I can… I’m good at that.”

“Excellent. With the recent deaths of three elders, I am afraid the climate of the city has changed.” The Prince walked around the table a bit, sliding her finger along its edge, before picking up another one of the strange objects. This one was a human hand, a dried and wrinkled thing but still at full size. An eye was tattooed onto its palm, and string was wrapped tight around the cut wrist. And of course, a stick the size and length of a forearm was fixed to the wrist. Because that’s what people wanted to wave around like a wand, a human hand on a stick.

“A hand of glory,” she said. “This one, I have not the details save for three. It is of a woman’s hand, that a thousand lives perished for her cruelty, and that the hand is at least five hundred years old.” Delicate fingers held it horizontal, and she set it upon Daniel’s open hands. Vampire skin had no harmful oils unless they were blushing life; probably a key part in how long the objects had survived in such good condition.

Daniel looked down at the hand, face deadpan save for a small twitch of his right eye, before he looked back up to the Prince. “As always, I see a woman wearing silk, laughing, bathed in blood and surrounded by corpses, a sword in hand.”

A woman, sword, silk? No historical figure jumped to mind.

Daniel held it out to her.

“… I uh… I shouldn’t.”

“Come now.” The Prince gestured to her, and her eyes betrayed no mercy. “Hold the object. You must become comfortable with these affairs if you are to become a member of the order; they are not always so bloodless, or dead.”

So much for only observing. Shaking hands and trembling fingers found the object, palms up, and Daniel set it into her grip.

Gross. But, even with the grossness, the skin of the object on her skin sent little sparks into her. Unlike the shrunken head and its icy touch, the dried hand felt alive. Odd, considering it was a dead thing just like the head. Natasha turned the hand about to point the palm tattoo toward her face, and she stared into it.

And as she stared, it stared back at her. She couldn’t see for sure, couldn’t tell, but it did seem like the eye was adjusting itself to keep eye contact with her, like a creepy portrait might. The longer she looked at it, the more it felt like staring into the eye of something alive.

“Should… should I start wearing gloves like you Sire?”

Daniel smirked, and raised a hand to his face to adjust his glasses, middle finger against the bridge. “It helps.”

Mental note: buy gloves, multiple.

The Prince took the hand, and set it back on the table. “We will do much of our experimenting in this room. It is the only locus within a hundred miles that is stable enough, and it is why I have built the tower here.”

“Locus?” Natasha said.

“A tear, Miss Vola. But, the details should come later. For now, let us focus on the occult, and the ways early kine and Kindred managed to see the hidden and touch the incorporeal in ways we have forgotten.”

“Forgotten.” She followed the Prince back to the table, and stared down at the objects. So many creepy things. “I wonder if… the Circle of the C-Crone remember any of them?”

The Prince smirked at her. “If you can convince Jacob to share his secrets with me, I would be delighted.”

Yeah, fat chance of that ever happening.

The next few hours were a blur of lectures and demonstrations on various occult items. The Prince seemed to be an intellectual at heart, which she already knew from when she was first in the order for a paltry time. But it was Antoinette’s passion for the items she described that surprised Natasha.

There was a vase with Egyptian hieroglyphs on it. Ashes were inside, and when placed upon the circle and viewed through the display, again they found blue wisps, this time two people, walking around the vase, holding hands. There was a mask with many lines of silver drawn on its black surface. Said to possess the powers of doom, and when put into the circle, it showed a black — not blue — cloud of some sort. There was a voodoo doll, which Natasha thought looked a little silly with pins sticking out of it, until that too was put into the circle. Another ghostly image was found, lying on the ground, with what could have been swords or spears sticking out of its chest. Hard to tell with wisps of cloud, but it looked dead.

Most disturbing, Natasha found, was the wedding dress. The Prince removed it from a garment bag and laid it out over another table in the large room. A few hundred years old, dirty, tattered, and with a very obvious blood splatter along its front. But when she put the dress into the circle, the viewed image froze Natasha solid. The ghostly images were clearer this time, as if the youth of the object compared to its older siblings affected them. And the image was of a woman wearing the dress, stabbing two other people, a man and woman, while they were in bed. It was all in blue wisp and fog, but the dress’s images were so detailed, so exact, Natasha found herself mesmerized by the vividness and brutality. Whoever wore the dress stabbed the two in bed, and stabbed them, and stabbed, and stabbed, for ten minutes.

Hell hath no fury. Damien would probably say something like that.

After each event, the Prince asked Natasha to recite it back to her in detail. Now that she knew what her master was looking for, it got easier for her too, and lots of little details she’d normally leave out, she started to add in. And each one earned a smile and nod of approval from either her sire or the Prince. They wanted her to embrace her attention to detail and obsession with accuracy, instead of summarizing things into neat, inaccurate little boxes like Maria would. And as much as she was glimpsing into something disturbing and horrifying, she was enjoying herself. The nightmares would be worth it, hopefully.

“You may leave now, Miss Vola. I do expect you back tomorrow night. We have more to show.” The Prince offered her a nod and a tiny dismissing wave, before she returned to her table of occult objects. “Daniel, you may escort her.”

Escort. She didn’t need an escort, but she really wanted one. Maybe the Prince noticed?

Natasha returned the nod, made a small bow, and as Daniel came up beside her, she turned and left the room of ghosts. Out into the hall, her knees started to shake again, and she forced herself to smile up at her sire as they re-entered the large stairway and started up to the tower lobby.

“That was t-t-t-terrifying.”

“Indeed.” He didn’t return her gaze, hands in his pockets and glasses pointed forward. “The first night the order introduced me to the experiments they did, I was also terrified.”

“What sort of experiments?”

“The branch I was introduced to was not interested in the mystical, they were interested in blood and vitae. Experiments were performed on the bodies of Kindred, some willing, some not. Scalpel’s were a common sight.”

Oh god. She clutched her stomach at the old vomit reflex. Vampires cutting into other vampires was a sickening prospect. You could cut into a vampire, cut deep, without them dying.

As they rounded the corner of where the stairway connected to the lobby at its peak, she blinked and glanced down at some moving black dots along the wall and floor. A few spiders. Funny, she doubted the spiders had much to eat in as sterile and lifeless a place as the tower.

The walk back to her apartment building was not so fun. If she’d been alone, she would have run it rooftop style, not to enjoy being juvenile like many young Kindred did, but just to get home faster. Every shadow seemed like it was moving, every kine walking past looked like they had some dark, disturbing history, and the crescent moon above gazed down on her like it was watching her. There were things that existed just beyond what her eyes could see, and now she had proof of it.

If she were kine, she would not be able to sleep. At least a Kindred never had to worry about insomnia. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t be imagining dead girls crawling out of her TV, or rotting limbs grabbing her from her closet.

“You look worried,” Daniel said, once the two of them had walked a few blocks away from the tower and were exiting the Elysium zone.

“Course I’m worried! Now… now I know there are… I had no id-d-dea! No idea. I… ugh. Ignorance is bliss.”

The sheriff chuckled, only for a second, and adjusted his glasses before slipping his hand back into his long trench coat.

“Sorry. Your fears are mostly unwarranted, but only mostly. Ghosts, spirits, the stuff of ephemera? You don’t stumble into those sorts of things, Natasha, you have to go looking… and we will go looking.”

Ephemera? Ghosts? Spirits? Hearing it put into words was the knife that jammed home reality. Her shaking only got worse.

Outside her apartment building, deep in Invictus territory, Daniel put a hand on her shoulder. She really needed to move out of the Invictus half of South Side, find a place more neutral.

“You will be fine, Natasha. Before long, the secrets we hunt will no longer frighten you as you master them. As much.”

“I... I hope I can live up to that expect-t-tation.”

“You dealt with Maria for decades, Natasha. You’ll find the Prince and I easier to deal with.” And again, her sire gave her a smile. So many smiles in a single night. Was he really that happy working with her again?

That made her smile too.

Daniel adjusted his glasses, nodded, and turned around.

“W-wait,” she said. Wait, wait what? He turned around, head tipped to the side. Waiting. Well, at least he was listening, a far cry from how things went back then. “We uh… we should… c-catch up somet-t-t-time? Maybe… get a drink together?”

Another smile. “I would like that.”