

~~Jack~~

After ten seconds, or an eternity, Clara pulled away. She blinked at him a few times, surprised. Well, he was damn surprised too, half by the kiss, half by how he didn't push her away. And surprised again, but how much he liked it. Antoinette's kisses were perfect, every single time. Clara's were not. They were shaky and a little rough, and... and he really liked that.

"Surprised you let me do that," Clara said, smiling. Not a big, happy smile. A sad smile. She knew what he was going to say.

"I am too. I... shouldn't have."

"Shouldn't have? Jack, you're dating an ancient vampire who probably doesn't even know what romance feels like. I'm trying to get through to you that you don't need to be with such a cold bitch."

"That's not fair. She... she knows she's different than me, knows her age has made her... jaded. It's not something she just accepts, and turns me into some sort of fly in her web, Clara. She tries. She really tries to dig up those parts of her, the young parts that got buried in centuries of vampire bullshit."

"Can't teach an old dog new tricks, Jack. She's a deadly, ancient vampire, and she sees everyone and everything around her as a tool for her goals."

"I..." Fuck, it was hard to refute that point, after his argument with Antoinette earlier. But, a memory surfaced, and tugged at him, tugged until it hurt. "One time, when something bad happened to me, and it was partly her fault, she was... she almost panicked with concern for me. Like, I was standing there in front of her, having nearly just died, almost chopped in half head to crotch, and when she realized I'd gotten dragged into something she caused, she was terrified." The memory of waking up in her tower after Viktor had nearly killed him was a night he wouldn't forget. Especially cause he had sex with her for the first time not long after.

"Terrified?"

"Kinda, yeah. We hadn't been dating long, but I could tell her conversations with me were something she hadn't had with another person in ages. She was really, genuinely panicked that she might lose that."

"Not really sure what you're driving at."

"I... I'm just saying that Antoinette knows she's lost a lot of what makes her human in her age, and I help her find those lost parts. And I don't mind doing that. Hell, I like doing that. I like helping

her find those pieces.” Jack loved to fix things. And each time, it felt great. It felt great because he loved her, and he wanted to help her. “It’s not fair to say she’s a cold, ruthless bitch. I mean she is, but that’s not all there is to her.”

“And you’re really comfortable being her emotion dowser? Christ Jack, she’s telling you to let your mom bite the bullet.”

“That’s not... that’s twisting the truth.”

“Is it? If shit hits the fan, your mom’s on the front lines. And the Prince, your girlfriend, told you to just accept that. She even let you argue?”

“I got to say... stuff.” It’d been a short argument, with Antoinette in her ‘mastermind puppeteer’ mode. Or maybe ‘cold, ruthless queen’ was the better descriptor.

“Jack, listen to me. Antoinette is half a millennium old, and if you think she’s cold now, it’s only going to get worse. I won’t.”

He looked away. “No, but you’ll die eventually.” She wasn’t a vampire.

“I got another hundred years left in me, Jack. And you know what I want to do with it? Spend it with a stupid kid who keeps thinking he can fix everything. Cause he’s got a great heart.” She pushed his closer shoulder into the back of the couch, forcing him to twist and face her. “And cause despite being a pipsqueak, he’s fucking ripped.”

He managed a smile at that, but he didn’t meet her eyes, not now. He didn’t want the temptation.

“Thanks.”

“And I’m not some ancient bitch vampire. I’m here on a fucking whim, not planning some plot or manipulating people.”

“Manipulating me a little bit, don’t you think?”

Frowning, she got up, pushed both his shoulders into the couch, and straddled him. He gulped as he blinked up at her, body freezing more than it did when she kissed him. Uh oh.

“Jack, listen to me, you god damn idiot. Antoinette is what, your first girlfriend?”

“N... Not technically.” He kinda had a girlfriend before, sorta, temp prom date thing that died quickly.

She rolled her eyes, seeing through his bullshit instantly. “You’re like the naive girl who married her high school sweetheart, and never experiences anything else, never realizes there are other types of dudes out there who don’t suck.”

“I’m straight.”

“You know what I mean. Look at Damien! Dude’s dating a chick who can’t go five seconds without bursting at the seams with joy. You ever think you might be happier with someone like that?”

“Like Fiona? Not really. Pretty sure I’d go insane if I was around her too much.”

Sighing, she leaned in until they were almost kissing again, and with the couch behind him he couldn’t pull away.

“And me? You really want to spend however many decades with a cold bitch like Antoinette, when I’m right here? I’m warm, Jack. I’m warm, and I do everything by the seat of my pants. And I wouldn’t look to you to be some missing half of me that I desperately needed, for fuck’s sake. I look after me, for you. You look after you, for me. A healthy, normal, functioning relationship.”

She was definitely warm. So close, he could feel her breath on his body, and her warmth pushing through his clothes into his skin. He was lukewarm, and compared to him, she was a furnace. God, it’d be so easy to reach out, hug her, kiss her, touch her.

“And Brace? What about him?”

“Brace is great. Dumb, but nice as hell, and with a great body. Prime himbo material.” Apparently Clara wasn’t completely ignorant of memes. “And tall. Shit load taller than you.”

“Hey, low blow.”

She grinned at him. “But I’ve gone on two dinner dates with the dude, nothing more.”

“He seems like the three dates kinda guy. Maybe five.”

“Maybe.”

“And... and you’re going to have that third or fifth date?”

“That depends on you. I’m not going to string Brace along, but... I’m not gonna just sit here and say I don’t have feelings for you, Jack.”

“Christ, what do you want me to say, Clara? Yes, I like you. I like you a lot. I went to you for help with the hunters for a reason.”

“I should have asked for a better favor in return.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “Like what?”

“Obviously to have sex with me.”

“Um—”

“I’m kidding, Jack. But I would have asked for... for something more personal, I guess, than being let it on a secret. Maybe a date.”

“You really want to piss the Prince off that badly, don’t you?” He peeked past her to the door, half expecting Antoinette to walk in. Nope, thank god. He didn’t need anymore soap opera drama. If Antoinette found Clara sitting on his lap like this, it could easily end in blood.

“I don’t give a shit about her, except that I think she’s got you wrapped around her finger. Even if she’s sincere, it’s still fucked up that you’re doing so much for her, and she’s just leeching off you.” Clara leaned closer, enough their noses touched. “I wouldn’t.”

Something had clearly happened to make Clara a little — lot — more aggressive about her desires. And Jack was floored. A lot of what she said he kinda agreed with, and it was making it very hard to not take her up on it.

That’s what adults did, right? If they thought there was something wrong with their relationship, they evaluated. Fixable and worth it? Stay in relationship. Not fixable? Abandon. Abandoning a relationship was tough when it meant you were going to be alone, but Clara was right here, and very much willing to replace Antoinette. It was such a horrible way to look at it, but it was very true.

It was so easy to look at shit logically from the outside. But when looking at things from the inside, when buried in all the drama and emotion, everything got real blurry real quick. It’d be so easy to say yes, to dump Antoinette and her cruel bullshit. Clara was fun and... and normal, emotionally, intellectually, in a good way. He wouldn’t have to navigate Antoinette’s maze of a personality with Clara.

And his Beast fucking loved the idea of holding Clara, hugging and squeezing her tight, cumming inside her and Kissing her, and drinking deep of that prized werewolf blood. Just one word, right now, and she’d strip for him and straddle him again, let him penetrate her, and they could fuck the rest of the night away.

But the moment the thoughts ran through his mind, he did what he always did: considered both sides of the argument. His true curse, he supposed, a need to understand things in a logical way, the way Antoinette would. It stopped him — usually — from making bad decisions. He just never thought it’d happen in a romantic context.

The moment he thought about leaving Antoinette and spending the next ten, twenty, fifty years with Clara, thoughts of Antoinette ran through his mind. And hit him in the guts like a fucking semi.

He wanted to wake up next to Antoinette. He wanted to talk with her, about all the things they talked about, things other people wouldn't find interesting but she did. He wanted to hold her, kiss her, have sex with her, and spend the next hundred or five hundred years with her. He wanted to work with her to get through shit like they were experiencing now, not just abandon it because an easier option came along.

And amazing as Clara was, the only thing that was making him even consider taking her up on her offer right now, was that she was easier than Antoinette. That's all this was, a moment of weakness, because an easier option came along to tempt him.

He slowly took Clara's wrists, and pulled her hands off his shoulders. "Maybe she does have me around her finger. Maybe I have her finger in my grip. It's... it's not fair to say that just because our relationship is different, it's bad."

"It sounds like a toxic relationship to me."

"It's not toxic, far from it. There are problems, like this shit that's happening now with Mom. But I'm not going to dump Antoinette because of problems, not ones that can be fixed."

Groaning, Clara got off him and collapsed back on the other couch. "Christ, you really do think you can fix everything."

"Not true! I think she and I can fix things."

"You really think a super ancient vampire is going to change for you? You sound like a stupid young girl, reading some shitty Twilight fanfic."

He couldn't help but laugh about that. "Maybe. It's... it's not the same."

"Jesus you are loyal, so loyal it fucking hurts."

"Sorry. Can't go against my programming."

Her turn to laugh, and she leaned forward in her seat again as she shook her head. "Well, can't blame a girl for trying."

"No, I can't." He leaned forward, matching her as his eyes drifted toward her before looking back down. Couldn't maintain eye contact, not after this. "I... I would, you know? If I hadn't met Antoinette, I would."

“Thanks.”

“And Brace, he’ll—”

“Brace is nice! Too nice. Truth is we’ve been on more than a couple dates, and he’s very... afraid to get aggressive.”

Ooooh. Brace was a nice guy, but too nice. Jack wasn’t some kind of girl expert, but Antoinette was, and talked to Jack about social dynamics constantly. The solution to this problem was simple. Brace needed to learn that nice and passive weren’t the same thing. Yeah, be nice to the girl, but when it came to sexual chemistry, be aggressive. Kiss her when she’s not expecting it. Take her wrist and hold her. Pin her against a wall and kiss her deep.

Dude probably just didn’t realize how much women hated being idolized and held up on altars.

“You are a werewolf. Maybe he’s afraid to get all masculine on you, cause he’s pretty sure you could kick his ass?”

“Only when transformed. Right now I am just girl, a hard to kill girl, but a girl, who is much smaller than Brace and would like to know what it’s like to have a guy sweep her off her feet.”

“And you expected me to do that?”

She laughed, louder this time. “You were different.”

They both laughed, and slowly let the laughter die. After a while, they looked at each other, both sighing, and Clara took the cue. She got up, and opened his front door.

“Don’t... don’t tell Brace about this, ok?” she asked. “Just a moment of weakness, right?”

He smiled. “Too right.”

She left. He collapsed back against his couch, slapped both hands against his face, left them there, and groaned.

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Later that night, he decided to pay a trip to see the monsters. Anything so he could keep his mind off Antoinette, how pissed he was at her, and Clara, and how fucking easy it would have been to just say ‘yes’ and begin a relationship with a normal functioning woman. Was he against normal? Did he dislike normal? Did he love Antoinette because she was so strange, and hard to navigate?

And calling Clara normal was kind of an insult. She wasn't normal, just, normal by comparison to people like Antoinette and Jacob.

And she was hot! So damn hot. He'd seen her breasts, a fucking long time ago but he had, and the image was seared into his brain. When she'd been straddling him tonight, if he'd reached out and touched them, she would have fucked him right there. And if he'd pulled her down to him, he could have Kissed her, drained her, left her an exhausted mess of arousal, and fucked her until—

Jack groaned and smacked the side of his head. Which of course made the hunter beside him raise a brow and look at him. He brought Brace with him, down deep into the tunnels of Dolareido, because Jack was a masochist.

“Still don't think this is a good idea,” the hunter said.

“Damien and Jessy are busy dealing with Carthians. I need back up.”

“Uh...” The hunter scratched the back of his neck. “You know I'm only human, right?”

“Yeap.”

“I won't be of much use to you.”

“You're a hunter. You'll be fine. I don't expect anything bad to happen, I just need someone with a gun and a set of eyes.” Which could have been anyone besides Brace, but Jack didn't trust anyone in the Invictus at the moment.

Braced eyed him, eyebrow raised. “I still—”

“And I wanted to talk to you.”

“Aaaaah, ok now it makes sense. Kinda. Whatcha wanna talk about?” Even as he asked, the hunter put another step between him and Jack.

“Dennis and Marge seeing more of the city?”

“Yeah. Told your mom about that, actually.”

“You talked to Mom?”

“Yeap. She and the Circle — Jennifer and Beatrice anyway — dropped by when I was on a date with Clara.”

“And you... had a conversation with them?”

“Well yeah.”

Jesus christ this guy. Why would Clara like this guy, romantically? Then again, why was she into Jack? No accounting for taste.

“You were on a date with Clara. Insanely hot, single Clara. And when a few other vamps showed up, you...” He slowly looked at Brace, complete with slow dramatic head turn for effect.

“I... pulled up some chairs for them.”

Jack facepalmed. “Dude.”

“What? What, I was just being nice.”

A small part of Jack very much wanted to just let this guy fuck himself over. If he was too clueless on how to be romantic in a way that actually worked, let him suffer.

It was the same part of him that wanted to grab Brace and have a drink. The same part of him that liked the idea of binding Clara with the Vinculum and adding her to his inevitable harem. A werewolf, his slave, sex slave, companion, and bodyguard? The fun he'd have with her, and the things Antoinette would do to her, the kinda sex you can only have when you hate someone. Hate sex.

Jack clenched his eyes and shook his head. Shut up, Beast. He was hungry, and it was fucking with him. Maybe bringing Harcourt was a bad idea?

No, he needed to talk to the dude. Jack owed Clara, and if he could fix this, he should. He couldn't fix much lately, but maybe he could at least fix this.

“How the fuck are you so nice, dude?”

Brace shrugged as he looked ahead down the tunnel and its flickering lights. “It's a long, stupid, sad story involving my sister. Life is hard for hunters. Every hunter I've run into has been... well a lot more of them are like Angela than you might think. I swore I wouldn't be like them.”

There was depth to Brace Harcourt, much as he didn't give off that vibe. Goofball, sure, but not a complete moron. There were thoughts in that skull of his, and when shit hit the fan, those thoughts were actually damn useful. He kinda reminded Jack of Fiona, someone with a past and lifestyle that should have crushed their personality until they were bitter assholes. But somehow, they survived. Like they were more naturally buoyant than other people.

He envied them.

“And speaking of the other hunters.” Jack took a moment to wipe the rising malice from his voice. It was hard to say her name. “Athalia might want to know about Angela. She talk to you yet?”

“Nope. Ain’t nobody been talking to us from that side of the fence.”

“You know much about Angela? Personal stuff?”

“Uh, not that much, no. She was close with Jeremiah, father daughter kinda relationship... between psychopaths.”

“You know Athalia was her mother?”

“Know that, yeah.”

“You know they had a super rough history? Athalia was a Begotten when Angela was just a kid. I don’t know all the details, just...” He sighed and shook his head. “Athalia feels so damn guilty about what happened to her daughter. Completely destroyed relationship, plus she did some nasty monstery things to her daughter when she was growing up. She didn’t want to, but yeah.”

Brace whistled. “I mean, I knew Angela wanted to kill her, but... I guess the group and I put it together that Athalia must have done something to her. Didn’t think that, though.”

“So if Athalia asks you about Angela, try and answer if you can. And don’t sugarcoat it... much.” Athalia definitely preferred things blunt, but even she wouldn’t want to hear the absolute worst things about Angela, especially not after what happened.

“Alright, I’ll try.”

“And back on topic. Clara the first girl you’ve ever dated?”

“What? No... There’s been other girls. Sorta.” Sorta sounded a lot like fling.

“Uh huh. And the other girls, were all short flings brought on by dramatic hunter situations? Save the girl from the scary monster. Sometimes the girl’s grateful?”

“Well... I mean...” Poor guy adjusted his trench coat and groaned. “So there was this one girl. Her parents died in an accident with a vampire. I helped her out for a few months.”

“Slept with her?”

“Uh, yeah.” Judging from the look on his face, she probably threw herself at him.

“And then you left, determined to continue your hunter job?”

“... yeah.”

“And...”

“And there was this other girl, a rookie hunter. We bonded a bit on a monster hunt.” He didn’t need to explain what bonded meant. “We went our separate ways when the hunt was over.”

“And…”

“And there was this other girl, another hunter. We ended up being rivals, kinda, in a ghost hunt. Somehow we got together, until, you know, the ghost was dealt with.”

Jack didn’t need to ask about this girl either. No doubt the woman got aggressive and made the first move.

“So Clara is the first girl who’s not traumatized or all… hunter-brained,” Jack pointed at his temple, “you’ve ever dated.”

“Put it like that, I mean… yeah.”

“Ok, that means social norms apply. If you’re on a date, you focus on the girl, and other people should be told — politely — to go away. If she’s giving signals, you reciprocate by getting closer. If she continues to give signals, you make a move, even if it’s just touching her hand.” He was quoting Julias at this point. It sounded so easy to understand social cues when saying them, but knowing them in the moment was a whole different beast. “So next time you’re with Clara, pay attention, and do something romantic, would you?”

Brace raised his eyebrow again as he looked Jack in the eye. “Why’re you so concerned with Clara?”

“I owe her a lot. She was with us when we went after Jeremiah, remember?”

“Yeah but—”

“And anyone with half a braincell can see you ruining a good thing from a mile away. So hey, you did me a solid, and so did Clara. Now I’m gonna do the both of you a solid. Stop dragging your feet and be more aggressive with the girl.” Jack rolled his eyes, shrugged and kept walking. The cold shoulder was mean, but necessary to convince Brace he was being straight with him.

Jack also felt guilty. Clara was willing to abandon her potential relationship with Harcourt, for him. That was a strange, strange feeling, and Jack hated it. He also hated how it kept teasing some baser desire in him, the Beast in him, or his lizard brain, wanting more women to drink and fuck.

God, he hated all this soap opera drama.

“You like to give advice, don’t you?”

“Eh?”

“You got that kinda know-it-all personality.” Harcourt grinned at him. “But I mean, with everything that’s happened and you coming out on top every time, it’d probably pay to listen to you.”

Jack returned his smile. The guy really was way too nice and well adjusted to be a hunter.

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“Full house?” Jack asked.

Azamel coughed from her bed. Sándor stood nearby, watching like a gargoyle on its perch, off to the side and not on the stage. Athalia frowned down at Jack. Fiona waved. Mark didn’t so much as move his head. Other than the gargoyle, they were all sitting on the stage of concrete, Azamel with her blanket up to her waist, head and back propped up by some pillows, and a cigarette in hand.

She looked emaciated. He’d seen corpses in better condition than her.

“It won’t be long now,” Azamel said, coughing between puffs of smoke. Eventually she motioned to her fellow monsters with the trembling cigarette. “They’re here to bother the fuck out of me in my last days. So are you, apparently.”

Bother the fuck out of me. Not exactly how Azamel normally talked; close, but not quite. Sure she had a nasty mouth, but she normally talked with a bit of nobleness to her, like she was a queen born and raised in royalty a hundred years ago. A queen who hated being a queen, and hated everyone who insisted she be one. Natural potty mouth, sure, but not a casual speaker.

It hurt to hear her talk like that.

“Not here to talk to you at all, old bitch,” Jack said.

Everyone raised brows and looked at him, except Azamel and Mark. Mark smirked before disappearing into a book again, and Azamel laughed.

“The fuck do you want, then?”

“Wanted to talk to Athalia. I heard she might have seen something the night Garry’s little crew attacked the Xnomina HQ.”

Athalia groaned as she walked over to the edge of the concrete stage. “I see a lot of things. But you told us to stay out of this little turf war.”

“It’s only kinda related.”

“Kinda?”

“Ok mostly related. I want to know if you know what happened to Amanda.”

Again she groaned, hopped down from the stage, and landed in front of him. Her hard eyes always scared him, even now with the curse to protect him. A black woman, with long black hair and a tall, slim build, and utterly gorgeous. It wasn’t surprising the sheriff was attracted to her, but Jack couldn’t begin to imagine how the man was able to puncture her hard exterior.

“From what I’ve heard, Amanda’s death is a big deal,” she said. “Sorta Michael’s main point for why he’s given you vamps permission to use lethal force.”

Lethal force. Jack couldn’t help but smirk at the word choice. Vampires fighting vampires wasn’t some sort of organized affair run by a branch of the military or secret service. It was a dirty affair, chaotic, and personal.

“I don’t think she’s dead.”

Athalia’s face remained stone. “Oh?”

“I think Michael’s staked her and stashed her.” He looked to the others as well for a reaction. Fiona’s eyes went wide with surprise; she didn’t know. Sándor kept his face looking straight ahead, not directly at Jack, and his expression was made of stone. Not hard, mean stone like Athalia used, but the almost boring, indifferent stone a sculpture has.

Mark wasn’t any better. He sneered. Whether that meant he knew something Jack didn’t, or he was just delighting in Jack’s ignorance, Jack didn’t know. The dude was never happy since the Prince caught him spying.

Azamel, on the other hand, grinned at him. And no chance in Hell she grinned at him without meaning to, knowing full well he’d notice and jump to a conclusion from it.

Athalia smirked. “And what if he did?”

“I need confirmation. I’m going to do something stupid, super stupid, and I’d really prefer to know for sure if Amanda’s alive before I piss Michael off.”

“Aren’t you busy? Azamel’s convinced those tears are leading up to something nasty, and you’re running around dealing with some stupid vamps and a turf war?”

“I’d love to be done with this turf war! That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Then just kill Garry and his top vamps. Or kill Michael and take over. Whatever.”

Jack glared at her. What was it about him she didn't fucking understand? “I don't want to kill anyone, Athalia.”

“Your curse—”

“I don't want to kill anyone! I am not the curse! I'm me, Jack, just a young guy who thinks we could all get along if we pulled our heads out of asses and worked together.” He'd been mostly hands off with Athalia since her daughter died, but if the conversation with Maria taught him anything, it was tough love worked; on adults anyway. “Think what you want, it fucking kills me that I've killed so many people. Fucking kills me. Nightmares, all the fucking time.”

“Not one of mine, much as I'd love to say otherwise.”

He hadn't even considered that maybe one of the Begotten had managed to find a way to torture him with nightmares. Yeesh.

“Ok, well, I'm not a killer, and you fucking know it. Stop being a bitch, and be straight with me. I'm on your team.”

Athalia returned his glare before looking to Azamel, only to frown when her boss smiled and nodded.

“You know if I start talking about what I saw, I'm getting involved?”

“And I'll do everything in my power, and the curse's power, to make sure no repercussions come the Begotten's way. If I have to kill Michael and anyone else to keep you guys out of this, I will. I'm not here to ask for information to win this war, I'm asking for information so I can end it. No one wins.”

Sighing, she stepped back and turned, and set her butt against the stage edge as she folded her arms across her chest. “And what about him?”

“Harcourt?” Jack shrugged as he looked up at the guy.

Harcourt put up his hands like he was about to be shot by a firing squad. “Just giving Jack some back up.”

“You trust Jack?”

The hunter shrugged. “I mean, yeah? Dude seems cool. I've seen a lot of shit in my life you know, and... and Jack's the nicest vamp I've ever dealt with. Ever.”

Rolling her eyes, Athalia shrugged. “Fine. Amanda’s alive.”

Finally.

“Thanks. Did you see what happened exactly?”

“From a distance. I was dropping Sándor off, and the building was on fire. But I saw Michael and her talking. And then he staked her.”

“What I thought then?”

“I guess. Except the girl didn’t react to the stake, except to just stand there like she was ready for it.”

“Like... she was ready for it?” Jack winced and paced in place. “Ah shit. Shit shit shit. I thought Michael sprung it on her. Never even fucking occurred to me he convinced her.”

“What’s that matter?” Athalia asked.

“Means if I go on a rescue mission, I’m rescuing someone that probably doesn’t wanna be rescued.” That made everything so much more fucking complicated. God fucking damn it, why couldn’t things just go smooth?

“I expect you to keep your word, Jack,” Athalia said. “Putting a lot on the line here.”

“He will,” Azamel said. Everyone looked to her as she erupted into a coughing fit, and she wiped her lips off with her scrawny, cracked fingers, before grinning at Jack again. “So, Michael has conspired with Amanda to trigger his war.”

“I don’t know about conspire,” Jack said. “Might be blackmailing her or something.”

Azamel groaned, coughed again, and forced herself to sit up. Mark got up, but Azamel waved him off, and the man sat back down.

“This is concerning.”

“What?” Jack said. “Now it’s concerning you?”

“Yes, now, idiot boy. Before when Michael and Garry fought, it was typical vampire nonsense. But after Athalia told me what she saw, I’m feeling this battle is too personal.”

“And... that’s a problem for you.”

“Yes, it is. The Invictus and Carthians fight each other in most cities, but usually for the typical reasons.” She took another drag of her cigarette, and blew the smoke at him. Even up on her stage, twenty feet away, she still managed to reach him with the smoke. “Michael and Garry are letting

personal history affect their actions. Volatile. This city has enough problems dealing with the tears, and likely Black Blood itself, a far greater problem than this stupid war. And I will not leave my family to contend with this idiocy when I am gone.”

The will and strength in that voice did not match her appearance. But everyone in the room paid attention anyway as power radiated from the old, dying woman. Even Brace stepped away from her, for the seventh time, and did his best to avoid looking directly at her. He’d seen what she really looked like, they all had, and no one wanted to mess with the giant angry elephant god, deathbed or not.

Jack put up a hand. “I’m working on it, ok? But the fuck am I supposed to do? Garry and Michael hate each other for some ugly personal shit.” No need to tell them the details. They—

“The suicide of Michael’s childe, yes yes, I know.” Azamel waved her free hand while smoking with the other.

“You... you knew?”

“Of course. I was here long ago, boy. Remember? I involved myself in the affairs of Kindred quite a bit back then, almost ninety years ago.”

“Didn’t know you’d gotten that involved.” Jack approached the stage, but didn’t jump up when Mark glared at him. But again, Azamel waved her bodyguard off, and Mark relented, returning to his book. Jack jumped up, and sat down beside the old woman.

“I involved myself in the squabbles of Garry, Viktor, Lucas, and Michael, yes. It was a way for me to feed, to pursue my goals, to look for a nesting ground, where other Begotten could rest. To pursue my inheritance. Things didn’t go well.”

“So I heard. Antoinette says you destroyed some buildings.”

Harcourt took another step back. Of course, doing so put him a little closer to Sándor, and a look his way filled the hunter with obvious awkwardness, and he stepped back from him too, getting closer to the tunnel entrance every minute.

“The vampires and I didn’t get along. I made a point.” She leaned in toward Jack, and squinted an eye as she met his gaze. “Sándor doesn’t have the ruthlessness needed to deal with the vampires, Jack. If this turf war is still going on when I’m gone, we may very well get dragged into it, like the Uratha inevitably will.”

“The werewolves are going to stay out of it.”

“Don’t be absurd. Give it time and things will happen, they always do, and Avery will side with the group she identifies with.”

Jack looked down. “The Carthians.”

“Exactly. And you know this turf war is a distraction. The timing is too perfect.”

“Yeah, yeah I know. I... Fuck, I don’t know. I need to get Garry and Michael into a room together, and get them talking.”

“Ha! You think pop psychology will save the day? They are ancient predators, Jack. The only thing they understand is brute force.”

“The Prince—”

“Cannot deal with them without risking her precious city and her precious experiment. She has negotiated herself into a place of passive power, and now any move she makes will trigger the house of cards to fall.” Azamel puffed again, and blew the smoke upward; a step up, from blowing in Jack’s face like usual. “It would have been better if she’d ruled with an iron fist.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’m still thoroughly in the cooperation camp.”

“Of course you are. Well, understand that while Garry and Michael do not despise each other to the degree Garry and the Prince despised Lucas, that doesn’t mean their hatred isn’t real. And as you said, it’s personal. They will fight each other, like angry dogs.”

“Well, if they’re dogs, then maybe I should let them fight?”

She grinned. “You mean face to face? In what universe do sniveling, cowardly elder vampires ever risk their own necks? Garry, perhaps, he is still young compared to other elders. But not Michael.”

Jack threw up his hands. “I need some way to get those two assholes to stop. If it’s really because of this personal hate building between them for a fucking century—”

“Or whatever force is manipulating circumstance.”

“Or that, yeah. Black Blood?”

“Perhaps. I’m thinking Jacob.”

“Oh fucking god.” Jack grabbed his head and shook it. “Ok, I’ll worry about Jacob and Black Blood later.”

“Even though your mother is—”

“I know!” His voice bounced around the large concrete room.

Azamel sat up a little straighter, and everyone looked at Jack like he'd just challenged the devil to a ring fight. But after a few seconds of painful, awkward silence, the old monster laughed.

“You will not be able to resolve this anger between Michael and Garry.”

“I don't need to resolve it, just bring it down from a boil to a simmer. If I can keep it simmering for all eternity, I'll be fucking happy. But the moment a vampire makes a single misstep, I'll wake up the next night to news of twenty dead vampires, and the Invictus going into full DEFCON 1. There's going to be firefights in the streets. Kine are going to see vampires using abilities. The Prince will get involved. It'll take another hundred dead vampires before things calm down. And I. Don't. Want that.”

Azamel watched him for a while, her smile shifting between different types he couldn't identify. She was thinking about something. Thinking about a lot of things, from how her eyes eventually looked up to the ceiling, and her smile changed again, before she looked back to him.

“Your only option is to force the two to confront each other directly, without their realizing, I imagine.”

“That... will be difficult.”

“For you, and even for me. But you do know someone who's good at manipulating people, don't you?”

God damn it. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

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~~Beatrice~~

“You're sure you're sure?”

Sam nodded. “Yes. Let's do it.”

Beatrice nodded, and she and Jen stepped down into the basement of the old factory.

It took Triss a long time to find this place, abandoned and unknown, filled with undisturbed dust, and a giant walk-in fridge. And a small modification to the handle made it easy enough to lock on the outside with a padlock that'd take a blowtorch to get through. A perfect place to stash stuff.

It wasn't just that she found some random, abandoned building from the bygone era of Dolareido's industrial boom. The building's wiring was totally fucked, and she made sure to extra fuck it, so in the random case someone decided to re-purpose the building, it'd take them weeks to get it fixed, plenty of time to get her shit and get out. And that wouldn't happen. This whole section of North Side was abandoned, and no one was going to randomly buy some shitty old building that must have been some big restaurant that failed.

She opened the padlock, and pulled open the big door. She held up a hand, stopping Samantha and Jen, before she stepped into the room, turned around, and ran a finger along the door frame. It was coated in blood, and she clutched her crow skull necklace in her left hand as her right hand ran the whole frame, beginning to end.

Ritual deactivated, the blood vanished. She'd have to cast it again before they left. She wasn't going to risk people finding this. She had enough things to worry about without breaking the Masquerade.

Once Beatrice motioned for them, Samantha followed in, and gasped.

"Oh my god."

"The part of witchcraft people don't really appreciate," Triss said. "The murder part." Sighing, she squatted down in front of the pile of bodies, men and women she'd killed, and forced herself to look at them. "Before you ask, I made sure each and every person I've killed deserved it. Dolareido's a big, big city, and there are some nasty fuckers doing nasty shit, if you look hard enough."

"I... I believe you."

Triss looked over her shoulder to the woman, and did a quick check on her expression. Samantha was definitely shocked to see a pile of bodies, six in total, piled up in the old walk-in fridge, but she wasn't freaking out. Girl had seen a lot in her... what, six months since being a vampire?

"It's one of the reasons Dolareido is the way it is," Jen said. "I'm sure both Antoinette and Jacob made sure the city had an undercurrent of... vileness, so they'd have access to people like these."

"Better than other cities," Triss said, shrugging. "Like Harcourt and Clara were talking about, vamps aren't so nice elsewhere."

Samantha gulped. "But—"

"But it's still murder, I know. And that's what it's like being a witch, Sam. It's why Jacob hasn't included you in anything the Circle does." Saying the 'Circle' helped eased the burden, but truth was

the only people in the Circle getting their hands bloody like this were Triss and Jacob. “And hey, I went through that phase when I was younger, not wanting to kill people. Lasted a few weeks.”

“A few weeks!?”

“The typical shit a Nos goes through. Woke up from a death that I didn’t ask for, looking like a fucking shark. You’re damn right I had anger issues. Didn’t take long to learn that vampires are allowed to kill, and I knew exactly where to go for some therapy. Devil’s Corner. Waited until I found a real asshole, someone who really fucking deserved to die, and I fucking killed them. Scared them until they pissed themselves, then I drained them, and I made sure it hurt.” Triss slowly stood up and turned to face the very scared Daeva. “Lots of vampires do it, find humans who deserve death, and kill them.”

“Like, um, vigilantes?”

“No, the Prince would stop any vampire vigilante, cause that shit would end up on the news eventually. But if you’re careful about what you do, you can find humans in this massive city that no one will care about disappearing.” She shrugged. “There’s a reason homicide and the real fucking shit crimes are lower in Dolareido than other cities. The Prince made it clear that vamps should focus on cunts who deserve to die, if we find ourselves needing, or wanting, to kill.”

Poor Samantha. She squirmed in place, eyes drifting between Triss and the pile of the bodies. “They’re... they’re not rotting.”

“No. Elen showed me a trick to keep them from rotting.”

“Magic stuff?”

Triss nodded.

Samantha’s eyes went wider. “Wow.”

“My point is, you’re a vampire now, and you should feel ok with killing people. Which is a fucking horrible thing to say, I know, and I don’t really mean it. But at the same time, we’re predators. You have to be comfortable with this sort of shit, if you’re going to... do witch things.” Like reviving your dead daughter. “Hell, you need to be comfortable doing it, in case shit happens.”

“Like Jack did with Mrs. Pavala.”

Ah right, the kid killed someone on his first night, and had to hide the evidence. Christ, what a shitty way to get introduced to his second life. It was nothing compared to waking up with a crocodile mouth, but still.

“Not exactly the same, but yeah. Or if you ever give up the Masquerade to someone who was alive, you’ll have to do something. That could mean killing someone.” Triss made damn sure to avoid saying just how nasty that situation could get. More than a few vampires had been forced to kill innocent people because some kine got too deep or too lucky, and getting a Ventrue to wipe their memories wasn’t a fast enough option.

“I... I know.” Poor woman. Sam shook her head as she hugged herself. “I know.”

Jen sighed, and set a hand on the shivering Sam’s shoulder. “We wanted to keep this from you, for obvious reasons. But we’ve been working with Elen to build a new body for Julias for a while, and we kept running into problems. We’ve had to... acquire more and more bodies.”

“Oh god.”

Yeap, that sounded bad. That sounded really fucking bad. Seeing the shock on Sam’s face was a kick in the guts.

“We’re doing our best to be ethical about this,” Triss said. “But yeah, I ain’t gonna lie to myself about it. We’re killing people, a lot of people, so we... so I can try and resurrect Julias. And we can argue philosophy and shit, about if it’s right to do that, even if I’m making sure I only kill scum. But I’m still gonna keep going. I’m neck deep in this shit, and I’m gonna keep fucking going.”

Staring at her, Sam managed a heavy gulp, and looked back at the pile of corpses.

“I’m a vampire. I’m a vampire. I’m a vampire. I have a vampire son, and a ghost daughter. I drink blood. I’m half dead.” Evidently she had a mantra.

“Alright. Now, don’t watch if you don’t want to. This is gonna get messy.”

Samantha nodded, wriggling some more, eyes wide, but she didn’t look away. The mantra worked.

Triss squatted down in front of the dead, her kills, and grabbed some dude’s body. Some fucker who beat his wife and sexually abused his kids. Maybe she should pick a girl body? Not like Dolareido didn’t have women the world was better off without, and she’d piled a couple of them here. Whatever. Julias was a dude, so maybe that mattered.

She grabbed the guy, yanked him toward her by the leg, and picked him up. Lifeless eyes. A quick glance Sam’s way showed the woman staring at the corpse, right in the eyes. Rookie mistake. With her left hand holding the corpse up by the back of the neck, Triss closed the dead man’s eyes with her right.

And then she cut his flesh open. Her Nos claws were short, but plenty sharp, and cutting through skin and flesh was easy enough. Through the throat first, through cartilage and muscle, and then the spine. The body fell away, ka-splat, with enough impact to cause what little blood the corpse had to squirt a bit from the neck hole.

Samantha screamed and spun around. “Oh my god!”

“Told you to look away.” Triss gave Jen a sad glance, who returned it as expected. This was a bad idea, but the woman wanted to see. And after stealing the book and knife from her sire, the fucking Prince of Dolareido, the least the witches could do was let the woman see how the sausage was made.

Samantha managed a few more peeks, but each time it only lasted a couple seconds, as Triss’s work only grew bloodier. She needed the skull, the seat of the mind, not the brains and eyeballs and jaw and stuff; apparently blood magic was a little behind the science of what actually held the mind, thinking it was the skull and not the brain. Whatever. Triss ran her claws over the skull, splitting skin, and she tore it off. She sank her claws into the eye sockets, and scooped them out. She ripped off the jaw.

Getting the brain out wasn’t so easy, and she knew it wouldn’t be. But she’d come prepared, and she used a small metal long spoon stick sorta thing Jacob had given her. Because her boss literally had the tools lying around to get brains out of a skull. Scooping it out through the, according to Jacob, Foramen magnum, the hole at the bottom of the skull, was fucking nasty, but Doctor Jacob had given her good instructions.

Soon, all that was left was a skull. A bit bloody with gross, old dead man’s blood and some flesh bits, maybe some brain bits still inside, but a skull. Strange how small it was compared to an actual head.

She held the thing in her hand, the first skull she’d ever extracted from a corpse, and she let the weight of it sink in. A skull, bone, seat of the mind. Ok yeah, maybe the old superstitions about skulls meant something, cause she felt a lot more than literal weight, holding it in her hands. This was something real, something more than a bunch of calcium meant to hold a brain in a protective cage.

Fucking chills.

She handed the skull to Jen. Jen didn’t wanna touch it of course, and she grimaced when she held it in her palm, flashlight in her other hand. But once she felt the weight of it too, she stared at the bloody sphere of bone, and Triss got to see what she must have looked like when she held it. There was wonder

in those eyes. Much as Jen didn't really consider herself a witch, she was a member of the Circle for a reason, and she'd stuck with Triss through shit that'd scare off any pussy Invictus or Carthian.

Triss squatted down over the corpse, and took a second to think. How to get it out? Bone saw and shit? Nah, fuck that. It wouldn't have the same weight, the same meaning and value, if she cheated. She was a vampire. Crúac was blood magic for vampires. She had to do this shit like a proper vampire would.

She ripped the dude's shirt open, sank both of her claws into the chest sternum, and ripped the body a fresh new hole.

Samantha outright squeaked this time. "Oh my god! Triss, you... what're you doing?"

Ripping a chest cavity open wasn't a seamless process. She had to break ribs, tear through flesh, and push shit aside. Messy. If the corpse had any blood left in it, she would have been soaked in gore before she was done. It was noisy too, and every crack, crunch, and squelching rip earned more panicked noises from Samantha.

But when Triss wrapped her right hand around the fucker's heart, and sliced it out with her left hand's claws, the same chills shot up through her hand and into her whole body. She stood up and stared at the organ in her hand, a flesh pump, a muscle that only knew how to move blood through a body and nothing more. But to a lot of cultures and beliefs long dead and gone, the heart was the seat of the soul.

She had a hard time believing that. Hell, she was a vampire, and had been for a decades now. Her heart wasn't anything more than a withered prune unless she was Blushing Life, and she damn well knew she had a soul. But holy fuck, holding the organ in her hand definitely had her questioning if she should dismiss those old beliefs. Power. Tingling, almost electric power coursed down through her arm and into her core. Holy fuck, what would it feel like to rip the heart out of a living person?

No wonder Jacob had all those tools for dismantling bodies in his main ritual room. Assuming that was his main ritual room. Dude had to have others.

"There, got what I need." Triss picked the body up and set it beside the pile. Beside, not on. Didn't want the guts and whatnot spilling on the other bodies and making a disgusting mess even worse.

"Finally." Samantha turned around again, and looked at the skull and heart, eyes wide and locked. "It's... it's really like in the stories. Witches and stuff."

Triss grinned at the woman, pulled the big black — had to be black — jewelry bag out of her pocket, set the heart in it, and held it open for the Ventrue. Jen was considerably gentler with the skull than Triss was, and she was stuck somewhere between grimacing and smiling with each moment. But Triss could also see the intrigue there, the curiosity, the wonder, as she set the skull in the bag.

Even Samantha stared on, curious, making an effort to keep her eyes off the pile of bodies, but drawn by what Triss was doing.

Triss took a deep breath, pulled out her phone, and brought up a picture at an angle so Jen and Sam couldn't see. Julias. Dude was sitting around reading a book when she took this picture, but he'd looked up quick and managed to get a pose. The classic, subtle but powerful smile, the sort really confident rich dudes who could secretly be mastermind villains had. Fucker was so damn photogenic, it was hard to take a bad picture of him. Not that she'd taken many, Masquerade risk that it was creating any sort of paper trail of a vampire. But she had a couple, and this was one of the better ones.

She dug through the memory, and let it envelop her. Julias's damn, stupidly awesome smile. His big arms wrapped around her. His calm, soothing voice. His demeanor, the suaveness that she loved and hated. The way he had a big soft side that was so sappy, it was painful. To other vampires, Julias was a deadly ancilla. To her, he was a big mushy puppy dog. Except when he wasn't, except when he took control, and took her into his arms, held her down, and did things to her. Except when he kissed her.

She dug through the memory until it hurt, until she'd rather be cutting herself open and pouring acid in the wounds. She'd suppressed these memories, and let them fade as best she could. Jen had helped a lot. All the sex helped a lot. Hanging out with the Circle, watching Sam getting DP'd and loving it, and Triss watching, enjoying by proxy, it was all an indulgence that helped her forget.

And she threw months of progress out the window as she cast the ritual. She reached into her core, that part of her that could summon vitae the way everyone knew how to flex a muscle. The strange energy poured up into her, and she funneled it into her right arm. With a heavy sigh, she bit her wrist open, and continued to pour her energy through her and into the arm, until she summoned a large droplet of vampire blood. Dark, thick, so much thicker than kine blood. And she stared at it as she infused her vitae into it, and her memories.

The blood fell into the bag, held by her left hand. Another drop, and another. This wasn't a small ritual, something easy like a warding spell. She was summoning a piece of Julias, a chunk of who and what he was, something she'd use as the seed for his actual body, the seat for his mind and soul.

She was a child, reaching into dark water, completely unaware of what lay beneath. Well, maybe not a child, cause she was smart enough to be fucking terrified. Something lurked in the dark,

something that listened to Triss and her ritual, something that was dancing to her tune. The Crone? No chance, she was too big, too powerful. Each ritual probably touched on something different, and each one probably came with its own risks of touching things that shouldn't be touched.

Didn't matter. In for a penny.

She stopped the bleeding, closed the bag, and held it up with both hands.

"Be found and returned, Julias," she said. The words were stupid and cheesy, and every part of her thought she'd cringe saying them. No way witches did idiotic shit like chant crap verses like this. But when she said the words, she knew it was like knocking on the door of whatever was out there, listening, and waiting. "I call to the darkness that watches and listens, that knows the dead. Find, and bring a piece of Julias back to me."

The room had been pretty damn dark before, with only Jen's flashlight lighting it up. But when the still air turned into a swirling wind, and a howl that didn't sound like wind at all filled the room, the tiny flashlight flickered, flickered, and died.

The bag grew lighter.

Triss held onto the bag with both hands as it shook. Something was inside the bag, and it fought to get out. Hisses, growls, it shrieked and wailed in the same pitch as the wind that filled the corpse fridge.

"Triss!" Sam yelled. "Triss, what's going on!?"

"Nothing! Just stay put. Wait."

What sort of rituals had Jacob cast that had repercussions a thousand times scarier? What crazy sort of shit did he do, that had everything around him reacting? She could imagine it, easily, Jacob sacrificing a kine under the full moon in a forest, and the forest flipping the fuck out. The fire would go out, animals would flee, and the wind would start shrieking like a fucking banshee, like it was now.

Thank god Triss's little ritual didn't last long. The bag got lighter and lighter, and soon it stopped fighting. The wind in the fridge turned into still air again, and the shrieking died with it. The flashlight flickered again, and stayed on.

That was a quick brush with one of the more fucked up rituals. Jacob had warned her they could get nasty, and dangerous, and she might have to do more than just say a few words and sacrifice some vitae next time. Wrestling with the forces of darkness, struggling to keep them bound to the ritual, to force them to enact the witch's desire? Yeah, that sounded witchy. And what Triss did felt almost like she'd been teasing a cat with a toy, and then yanked the toy back.

Which of course meant there was a chance she pissed something off, and it might bite her in the ass later. No wonder witches supposedly made protection talismans for themselves and whatnot.

She lowered her hands, rubbed her crow skull necklace with her right, and let the bag dangle at her left. Tempting to look, but it could wait.

“It’s... it’s done?” Jennifer asked.

“Yeah. Let’s get back to Elen. I don’t know how long this... this thing will last, and I don’t want to do this again.”

Her friend grinned. “You don’t? You looked almost excited to be casting a ritual.”

“Excited... yeah, I guess I was.” Excited. Terrified. Some mix of the two. She didn’t really know.

Sam threw up a hand. “That was scary! Oh my god, it was like a movie! And I could hear howling, and and and—”

Jennifer gave Samantha a pat on the shoulder, and everyone went quiet as they looked at the bag in Triss’s hand. It was a lot lighter, and not bulked with mass anymore, but it wasn’t empty. Something was in there, and it wasn’t fighting against the bag anymore, but it wasn’t holding still, either.

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~~Antoinette~~

“Ann, what ever is the matter, dear?”

Antoinette sighed as she looked down, and combed her hair over her shoulder. Elaine sat across from her at her desk, and set a hand on it as she leaned in and looked her in the eyes.

“My childe is in a terrible predicament.”

“Samantha?”

“Jacob is... perhaps involved in terrible things, and I let my Samantha get close to him.”

Elaine sighed as she relaxed in her chair. “I thought you wanted that?”

“I did. But now that her life is in danger, I am... regretting the decision.”

“Because her life is in danger? What has Jacob done?”

Antoinette shook her head. “I cannot share the details. My apologies, but this is deeply important, and dangerous.”

With a heavier sigh, Elaine leaned back in her chair as she shared a sorry smile with her. “Well, if it is Jacob we speak of, then I can only agree. Not about your regret over Samantha, but the man’s tendencies. Whatever he is up to, it is probably quite dangerous. But... I saw him with Samantha, Ann. I did not get the impression he was being insincere with her. Perhaps a little overtly flirtatious and playful, but not insincere.”

“I am sure Jacob seduced her to annoy both Jack and I, but since then, Samantha has shared with me details of their time together. I believe what was likely Jacob being his typical, mischievous self, has evolved into something more.”

“Ah, a classic tale of romance then? The mischievous man plays with a girl’s heart, only to find himself smitten?”

Antoinette could not help but smile at that idea. She had done the same to Jack, the first time they met in Bloodlust, oh so long ago. A young man, attractive, intelligent, squirming with fear and surprise, and she could not help but indulge her desire to tease the man, balancing his fear with arousal and intrigue. But then they had begun to converse, and she quickly found the boy far more interesting than he had any right to be.

Surely the same had happened between Samantha and Jacob? Her childe’s sexual indulgences did not exactly speak to typical juvenile flights of romantic fantasy, as Jacob, like Antoinette, did not mind sharing their lover with others; as long as they were there, of course. Perhaps that sexual freedom offended others, but to ancient vampires like Antoinette and Jacob, the act of sex meant little. It was the emotional exploration that carried weight. And Samantha had certainly spent time exploring with Jacob and the Circle. But once one took eccentric sexual tastes into account, Samantha’s tales of Jacob spoke of more than simple mischievous play.

“I believe my childe is safe. I believe Jacob is not a villain.”

“As do I. But then, one does not need to be a villain to be an enemy.” Sighing, Elaine shook her head as she tapped her chin with a finger. “But if something has happened that now causes you to doubt Jacob’s romantic interest in her?”

“No. But... we should be careful with the Circle, I believe.”

“If the Circle will cause trouble, that is not a trouble that will befall Samantha due to simple proximity.”

“Perhaps. But physical proximity and emotional proximity are not the same thing. If Jacob does something, something dangerous for the city, Samantha may find herself involved.”

“I think you should trust Jacob to not use your child against you. He is many things, but he is no vile serpent.”

Antoinette sighed relief. She knew this, but to hear another confirm her beliefs was important, especially after her argument with Jack.

“Jack, he knows.”

“Oh my. He has told her?”

“No. And I gave him orders not to.”

Elaine smiled softly as she met Antoinette’s eyes again. “That is why you seem depressed. I cannot imagine that conversation with your love went well.”

“It did not.”

“Will he obey?”

“I am not sure. He is intelligent, and capable of tactical reasoning. But after what the hunters did to his mother, he feels immense guilt about her. No doubt the boy will do whatever he feels is necessary to fix whatever situation Samantha finds herself in.”

“Even if by doing so, the situation for others will worsen?”

“I... do not know.” Jack was unique for a man his age in his ability to use sound reasoning. Given time, he would grow to become a powerful ancilla and eventual elder, with the power of his will and the sharpness of his intellect. But at the moment, he was undoubtedly trapped between his intelligence and emotions, and the strange power the curse granted him.

“Well, since you are determined to hold your secrets from me,” Elaine held up a dismissing hand, not offended, “I believe I can safely say that Jack will not act without yet another conversation with you. And perhaps in this second conversation, you can plead your case?”

“True. But, I am also concerned about the emotional repercussions. Jack has never been on the receiving end of my decisions, not like this.”

“Ah.” Elaine nodded as she tapped her finger to her chin once again. “In that, I do not believe I can be of help. It has been centuries since I have known the taste of love, and I cannot even begin to imagine the strange circumstance you find yourself in. Young Jack, confronted with the truth about his

love, that she can be cold and ruthless about someone as important as her own childe, and his own mother.”

“Please stop.” Antoinette groaned as she leaned back in her chair and combed her hair faster. “As you said, you have not known love for centuries. I have tasted it and I will not let it go. I...” Her frustrated groan turned into a weary sigh. The Daeva half of her would sooner see Dolareido burn than give up Jack. He was hers, and there was no universe where she would let him go. The human half of her realized how quickly that would destroy their relationship. To grasp sand tightly was to lose it.

“I do not know, Ann. Perhaps explain to him you do not make these decisions easily? Appeal to his emotions?”

“Perhaps. It would not be a lie. I am tempted to lock my childe up in the basement and leave her there until this issue with Jacob is resolved. But, that would tip my hand to Jacob. And I do not wish to damage my relationship with Samantha as with Tony.”

“Come now, Samantha could not possibly become another François.”

François. How many years had it been since she had used that name for her now dead childe?

“Did you not think the same of Viktor, Elaine?”

Elaine shook her head. “Viktor had a dark seed in him from night one. I sired him for the value he would provide me, you know that.”

Ah yes, Elaine could be just as brutal as Antoinette. More so, as a Ventrue with as troubled a past as her. But then, Elaine also had a soft side to her. The two of them would not be friends if her dragon rival had not displayed genuine moments of emotion and empathy over the years. Unfortunately, Elaine’s experience in romance was less than Antoinette’s.

Elder vampires did not indulge in true romance. Not because the opportunities did not present themselves, but because elders struggled to connect with their emotions, particularly where vulnerability was concerned. Jacob and Antoinette were oddities in that regard, and perhaps Daniel, given his interest in Athalia.

“I have told Jack that I would do much, sacrifice much, for our love. If I had to sacrifice my position with the Ordo, I would. But...”

“But Dolareido is more than a position in an organization. It is your child. You have spent over two centuries building it, nurturing it, and shaping it. If you had to pick between Jack and a project you have devoted your second life to, what would you do?”

Antoinette raised a hand, ready to slam it upon the desk. But she did not. Eventually she let the hand come to a rest, and took a deep, useless breath as she looked at her friend.

“What do I do, Elaine?”

Elaine laughed and shrugged. “If I knew, would I hide myself away in the Ordo for decades at a time, focused on my studies and nothing else? You have done here what few dragons would dream of, let alone pursue.”

“And come the next gathering of the Ordo Dracul, I will advise them to not pursue it. This project has been...”

Elaine laughed again as she leaned in. “Come now, Ann. This city is a labor of love. Do not deny your attachment, and your successes.”

“Is it? I have apparently built my so called utopia upon a damned land. Black Blood itself rises from the dead and dying that came long before I or Jacob ever stepped upon these shores.”

“Such is the curse of us who live in the paranormal world, I suppose, to forever stumble upon deadly threats beyond the flesh.”

“I—” Her phone buzzed. A quick glance told her it was one of her thralls operating a drone. The joys — and terrors — of the future. “May I?”

“By all means.”

Nodding, Antoinette scanned through the images sent to her. The drone took pictures from quite high, but she recognized the streets of her city well, and knew how to read the patterns and behaviors below.

“A gun fight, at the Border Bar. How lovely.”

“How drôle,” Elaine said, mimicking Antoinette’s French accent.

Antoinette returned her friend’s play with an annoyed grin, and scanned through more images. “A handful of Carthians, and... oh, Jack and another Invictus.”

“Any deaths?”

“I do not think so.” The camera could do little to find Kindred hiding with Obfuscate, but the body language suggested angry Carthians, not Carthians struggling with war. “Jack’s doing, I suppose. Even with Michael ordering him to push this war, he strives to keep my vision.”

“Yes, you and the boy align on many things.” Elaine’s smile turned into a serpent grin. “For better or worse.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes, and checked the next image. Jack, returning to his apartment. Jack, exiting his apartment building, with new clothes. Jack, going for a walk, and looking morose. A natural reaction, with the decision he now faced, a decision that left Antoinette anxious and depressed as well. What he decided would affect more than the city and her plans, it would affect their relationship.

Ice shot up through Antoinette’s fingers as the next picture showed something she did not expect. Clara. And Jack. Slowly, Antoinette slid to the next picture, and the phone trembled in her hand as the image showed Jack going to Clara. It stopped trembling, when the next picture showed Jack and Clara going back into the apartment building.

“Ann, are you alright? You look like you have seen something horrible.”

The next image showed Clara leaving the apartment building, alone. Thirty minutes later.

Five minutes is all it would take for that wolf slut to find her pleasure. Five minutes to destroy a relationship nearly three years old. Five minutes to rip away the first true note of pleasure Antoinette had found in centuries.

Slowly, Elaine reached out and took the phone from her. Antoinette did not stop her. After a few moments of silence, her friend sighed as she set the phone down on the desk.

“If... if this were any other time,” Elaine said, “I would say to trust the boy.”

“But this is not any other time. Jack is livid with me.”

“I... Yes, he is.”

“And people have betrayed each other for less.”

Elaine set her hand upon Antoinette’s. “Jack is not other people.”

“No.” She took another useless, deep breath. “But he is also not as old as you or I.” Old, ancient, and fully in control of their thoughts and actions. To understand the self, the desires of the subconscious, and to pursue such desires consciously was the purview elders, not young men barely older than boys.

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to pay Clara a visit, and rip this damn woman’s head from her shoulders.”

Elaine's grin returned, larger. "Then, perhaps we should? Not everything must be devious plots filled with nuance. The Carthians at least understand that sometimes, the best approach, is to kick down the door."

"Perhaps. Perhaps it is."

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Dressed in their business suits, the two eldest women in Dolareido walked the streets, knowing full well the night could end in murder.

Neither Daeva nor Ventrue were naturally talented at Obfuscate. To wrap the self in the Cloak of Night and hide the body, or nearby bodies and objects, was difficult. But Elaine and Antoinette were ancient creatures who had spent hundreds of years mastering the Disciplines, including those their blood clans did not have innate talent for. To hide themselves in darkness and disappear into crowds was a simple affair, and allowed the two women to approach the Carthian district easily enough.

"How long has it been since we have done this?" Elaine asked.

"Done what?"

"Take matters into our own hands. Walk the streets, ready to enact violence with our own might, instead of the might of those who serve us?"

Antoinette could not help but raise a brow as she looked at her old friend. "Strange to hear a Ventrue speak of using her own hands."

"You say that, but I did much with my own hands in my youth."

"You were cursed in your youth. Literally. And you have still not shared how you removed said curse."

Elaine eyed her with a touch more annoyance than Antoinette expected. Antoinette knew it was a difficult subject for her old friend, but she also knew Elaine kept her secrets, as Antoinette kept her own.

"It was hundreds of years ago, Ann. Tell me, how much do you remember of the first time we met?"

“A blur. A haze of motions. Words, sentences, random. I remember you came to my castle. I remember we got along well, and indulged in my host of thralls and ghouls.”

“That is what I remember. Bits, pieces. There is not a single conversation I can detail, or a moment I can fully describe. And yet you expect me to keep secrets of such a time from you? I rid myself of the curse at a similar time.”

“That... is true. I apologize. I am frustrated.”

“Clearly. But I have not forgotten. My thrall servants continue to pour through my notes, and I have delved into my memories as well as I can. They are... not pleasant memories.” Elaine looked down as she cradled her chin in a couple fingers.

Antoinette knew Elaine well enough to recognize her pensive look. Whatever thoughts danced through Elaine’s mind, she was not sharing all of them, but she was struggling with them. Both Antoinette and Jack knew Elaine’s motives for visiting Dolareido were not pure, but there had been opportunities for Elaine to perhaps attempt to capture or subdue Jack in some way, and she had not used them. Several times now she could have staked the boy when his guard was down, and taken him from the city, back to her hold to perform her experiments on. Or perhaps even steal the curse from him through some brutal reenactment of the original ritual that would no doubt leave Jack a pile of ash. But she had not.

Perhaps it was not a matter of Antoinette’s original idea of what her old friend was up to being wrong, but rather Elaine found herself struggling to enact it? It would be a great betrayal of her old friend, but a prize perhaps worthy of any betrayal, for an elder of her age to have the curse at her whim. Then again, Jack had made it clear to Antoinette that the curse was a terrible thing with a mind of its own. Perhaps her lover had convinced Elaine, directly or indirectly, to not pursue her original plan? It was almost expected at this point, that Jack would have such an effect on others. Her lover...

“Ann, you look ready to kill someone.” Thankfully, her old friend’s voice was lost in the crowds they past. “You are not angry with me. You are angry with Clara.”

“Obviously.”

“Will you kill her?”

“I do not know. Perhaps I will know when I see her.”

“If you kill her, you know Avery will go to war with you. You will be forced to expel her by force.”

Antoinette looked down for a moment as she let that reality settle upon her mind. Yes, if she continued to let her emotions, emotions she had long buried before she met Jack, now lead her into a confrontation, she could find herself triggering the problems she fought hard to prevent.

“Once, Avery and Simon confronted Viktor about some of his actions.”

“My childe did not react well to that, I assume? Even before I embraced him, Viktor did not take well to being denied, or accused.”

“He did not. He Dominated them. A rude awakening for Simon, to know an elder Kindred is a more powerful creature than even the most gifted Uratha.”

“A terrifying thought for the Uratha, I assume.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Do not underestimate Avery, old friend.” Elaine reached out and touched Antoinette’s shoulder. “It has been many years since Avery left Dolareido. Jack reported that she is capable of using a strange sort of spirit fire on her claws, correct?”

“Correct.” And that was a terrifying idea. The damage Avery had done to Jack... the Ripper’s body, was immense. And the Ripper curse had displayed feats of true power, especially in defensive abilities, such that Antoinette feared if the creature could ever be killed by anything other than fire or sun. If Avery had managed to damage him so completely with a single swipe of her claws, that was not the Avery Antoinette knew when she served Simon.

“Then consider that when you confront her second in command.”

“I thought you wished for me to kill Clara?”

Elaine laughed and shook her head. “I am intrigued by the idea, but I think when we confront Clara, you will not kill her. Exile her perhaps, but kill her? No.”

“You think I am too soft.”

“Nonsense. I think you are too intelligent to risk another problem for your city.”

Antoinette was not so sure. So many decades she had spent without emotions running so loudly through her mind. She was not used to hearing them scream in her ear, scream for vengeance, scream for love and hate and pain. For the first time in many years, Antoinette did not know what she would do.

The uncertainty terrified her.

The two vampires walked through the front door of the apartment building the Carthians had adopted, and deactivated their Cloaks. The werewolf guarding the small lobby, Caleb this night, jaw-dropped.

“Uh... hello, Prince. Elaine.”

Antoinette glanced at Elaine. Elaine returned it with a knowing smile, before she met Caleb’s eyes.

“What room does Clara sleep in?” the Ventrue said. And one did not need Auspex to feel the power that radiated from her ancient friend. Poor Caleb never stood a chance.

“Clara.” His voice turned deadpan, and the expression from his lively face vanished. “She sleeps in room 105.”

“And I assume she’s there now?”

“No. She went out. Hasn’t come back.”

Had not returned? She left Jack’s apartment, without Jack, but had not returned. Antoinette nodded to Elaine, and left.

“Forget you ever saw us, young wolf.” A moment later, Elaine was beside her once again.

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It was perhaps a good thing Clara was not in her den, to give the Prince more time to cool. Antoinette still did not know what she would do when she found the woman. But oh, the delight that would flow through her, ripping the girl’s head from her body. As with all elders, she rarely used her own hands, but now she ached to feel them sink through the girl’s skin and bones. And yet, would she truly feel delight, once the moment had past?

“You sure you do not wish for your sheriff to handle this?”

“This is personal, Elaine.” Antoinette managed to summon a knowing smile for her friend. “And you merely wish to spend more time with the man, despite how he has already made his interest in Athalia obvious.”

Elaine shrugged with an exaggerated eye roll. “A woman can dream.”

“Is there no one else you are interested in? Perhaps back in Europe?”

“Alas, no.”

“Are you even interested in Daniel? So far, you have only convinced me that you are interested in teasing and tormenting him.”

“Interested, of course. But in the way Athalia is? I do not think so, no.”

“Then I suggest you leave him be, for Athalia’s sake. The woman has suffered enough.”

Elaine looked at her quizzically. “Why do you care for her? Is she not a thorn in your side, along with the other Begotten?”

“I was concerned the Begotten would follow in Azamel’s footsteps, and rain arrogance down on my city. The damn woman did destroy a large building, last time she hid within my walls.”

“She does not appear to be that woman anymore. It seems she has a family now.”

“A family, in a way. Though now that the woman is dying, she has passed that mantle to Sándor, the gargoyle. And under his far calmer guidance, perhaps the other Begotten could become... a part of my city.”

“Why Antoinette, are you opening your heart to others? Has Jack rubbed off on you?”

Rubbed off on her, in perhaps the worst way, if Antoinette was now plagued with such thoughts. Perhaps—

Both women stopped and stared down the street of the Carthian district. This late at night, not many kine walked the streets, making it easy for the two women to see who was walking toward them. She would not see them, as both elders had wrapped themselves in Cloaks of Night, and she walked forward with her head pointed down.

Clara. A beautiful woman, the sort who was both gorgeous, and ‘sporty’, as the children of the modern age would say. With hands in her pockets, the woman slouched horribly as she stared at the sidewalk, and all her usual predatory grace was gone. And in the quiet of the night, with only flickering street lights to show the woman, her sniffles were audible, and her tears obvious.