

~~Antoinette~~

“Feeling better, old friend?”

Daniel managed a small nod as he sat down across from her. Deep in her tower, in one of her offices, the two could discuss matters privately, without fear of spies or accidental ears from a wandering Samantha. A quiet room of soundproofed walls, with only two chairs, a single desk, and little else. A room she and her sheriff used rarely, and only when to speak of the most painful of situations.

The fact her old friend sat, instead of standing as he usually preferred, was sign enough.

“Your boyfriend hits hard.”

Antoinette could not help but chuckle. “You know very well my little Terry could do nothing of the sort, even if he wanted to. The curse is what allows him such power.”

“Perhaps. He was always unusually skilled.”

“True, but there is a difference between natural skill, and what the curse is capable of.”

“True indeed.” Daniel rubbed one of his shoulders, and earned a wince. For her sheriff to make any sort of expression warranted note. “The curse hits hard. Will take another day to recover.”

“I did not imagine you fighting the creature with your fists, Daniel. You know what terrible feats the curse has accomplished.”

“It was either that, or use the sword, and then the curse would have... done whatever it wanted.”

“The curse takes longer than a single second to summon his legion, according to Jack.”

“Yes. But it could have tried anyway, and... I didn’t want to use the sword.”

Antoinette sighed, reached out, and touched her friend’s knee. “I appreciate the risk you took. My love appreciates it as well. But... but the Masquerade is more important than Jack, or you, or I.”

He nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

They both looked down. Yes, Antoinette had just given her sheriff permission to kill Jack if it was the only way to save the Masquerade. Of course, while modern technology was a curse, it was also a useful tool. If yet another swarm of crows was seen in the city, the Prince and the Invictus had stories in place to prevent the media from spinning it into something supernatural. But then, hunters could see through such lies, and more would come. And with hunters, came yet larger Masquerade risks.

A delicate balance, and her sheriff flirted with it, for her.

“You are lucky,” she said, “that the curse is smart enough to predict what would happen if it simply gave into its desires, and terrorized the city with its power.” She would lock it and Jack away until a better course of action could be found. The idea was disheartening, but a better reality than his death, or the death of the Masquerade.

“Agreed.” He rubbed through his shirt at a spot on his chest. “Didn’t feel lucky at the time.”

Was that... a joke? From her sheriff? Ah, of course. An evolution in her old friend’s state of mind, from a private visit he made following his encounter with the curse. A visit last night that left Antoinette surprised and delighted.

“How did your visit to Athalia’s go?”

Daniel eyed her. “Have you been spying on me, old friend?”

“Certainly not. But I have eyes and ears everywhere, as you well know. Are you surprised someone noticed you?”

“I didn’t try and sneak there...” He did not look convinced. “The visit went well.”

Grinning, Antoinette leaned forward and met her sheriff’s eyes. “Quite well, I imagine.”

“Ann...”

She put up her hands in surrender. “Forgive a Daeva her sexual curiosity. But I can see the twinkle in your eye, Daniel, despite your attempts to hide it. I think, perhaps, visiting Athalia while injured has awakened your relationship to a degree it did not have before?”

The cold stare was her confirmation. Daniel was a true master of hiding his expressions, but the two of them had worked together for centuries. It took little more than a small fidget of a finger, for her to see the man’s heart; or at least his guilt over a night of sexual bliss.

“She... was surprised.”

“That you came to her while injured?”

“Yes.”

“Ben oui, she likely considers you a difficult man to penetrate, old friend.” And what woman was not tickled by the classic romance plot of the wounded soldier and the nursing lady?

“I’m... not difficult.”

“Come now. Far be it from me to criticize you, or to point fingers, or to call attention to the troubles you and your childe have had.” Playful words, not meant to insult, but meant to draw attention to truth nonetheless. Daniel and Antoinette were comfortable enough with each other to navigate the most difficult and deadly of social mazes: offering criticism. “But, you are quite difficult. Women thrive on social cues, the meaning hidden in words and their inflections, the meaning in words said and not said, the stories shared in a glance. You, my old friend, offer little of this. Most would find it easier to strike a conversation with a stone.”

He smiled; again, a small thing. “I suppose.”

“Allow me to hypothesize how your evening with Athalia went.”

“... alright.”

“You visited her, perhaps unaware yourself as to why. Athalia was shocked to see the mighty sheriff injured. More shocked, to see he came to her while so vulnerable. And Athalia, a loud, angry, and scarred woman, found herself terribly uncomfortable by the circumstance. At first. But as the reality sank into her poor soul that you, old friend, decided to come to her to spend the rest of your night, she saw a side of you you had never shown before? Which led to some tender, and dare I say, emotional sex?”

While his steel gaze would have fooled most, Antoinette saw the break in his glare, the twitch in his lip, and the uncomfortable way he adjusted his glasses with a single finger.

“Yes.” Yes. Of course, yes. The most direct response to man could possibly offer. “It went... well.”

“I am happy for you.”

“Though, she... she told me she uh, wants me to...”

“Allow me another guess. She wishes to disappear into her man’s arms, and be treated like a naughty princess?”

“Naughty... princess?”

Antoinette laughed. “Come now, you know exactly what I mean. She wishes to be taken care of. Understandable. Athalia has suffered many hardships, and would love for someone else to take the reins of many aspects of her life. She is tired. And beneath that harsh, brutal visage she wears, there is a woman who wishes to bathe in the sweet bliss of being ravaged by a man in control.” With a playful

smile, Antoinette held out two palms over her lap. “In one hand, she wishes to be pampered, to recover from her life. In the other, she wishes to be taken, rendered helpless, and... fucked. Relentlessly.”

Athalia was tragic in many ways. She did not want to be the ruthless woman she was, but her Begotten curse, combined with her traumatizing, guilt-laden past with her daughter, forced her to become an angry creature. Angry, resentful, and unwilling to let anyone get close, as if someone had given a wolverine the quills of a porcupine.

But Athalia was no master of the social game. She was easy to understand to anyone familiar with psychology, let alone an old creature and student of human nature such as Antoinette. Athalia harbored deep, hidden secrets, perhaps secrets she once hid from herself, that she wanted to give in to another, surrender, and indulge in the strange joy of helplessness. She wanted a man she could trust, a reliable man like Daniel, to hold her down, perhaps even tie her up, and force sexual pleasures upon her.

And Daniel knew this. While the man was certainly no master of social interaction, he had the intellect and years to be able to understand someone like Athalia. The issue was not her, but him.

“She didn’t say it like that. But, she... did try and say that.” He sighed. “Guess I’m not good at talking.”

“Not true. You merely lack the confidence for social aggression.”

“Confidence?”

Antoinette nodded. “Or do you believe your history with others and social connections, has been solid, and has benefited from your habit of standing by, or stepping back? Your passivity?”

He winced slightly as he looked down. “I guess not.”

“Precisely. And that is why it is good to have a friend such as moi, mon ami.” Her smile grew as she leaned forward. “While I am no mind reader, I believe I can safely say that, after last night, your relationship with Athalia has grown. She will feel easier about opening herself to you, and will doubtless be thrilled if you were to take her roughly.”

“I’m afraid of hurting her.”

“Physically?”

“Mentally. She—”

“Is not made of glass, Daniel. Do not confuse the desire to be sexually submissive, with some sort of mental fragility. If anything, quite the opposite. The woman has been through Hell and has survived. She will not break if you take her hand and pin it against a wall.”

Slowly, perhaps a touch reluctantly, he nodded as he met her eyes again. “Alright. Thanks.”

“And do be sure to enthrall me with the details.” She beamed at him, and he rolled his eyes; again, barely.

How many times had they danced this dance? She wanted the best for her sheriff, and that included sexual fulfillment; low on the list of priorities for elders, who often found their satisfaction through the Kiss and nothing else, but still. But despite centuries of the two of them being close companions, Daniel rarely engaged her desire to talk of eroticism. Frustrating, considering Antoinette’s great interest in sexuality.

Perhaps now, with Athalia, he would grow more comfortable discussing sex? Or Antoinette would forever be doomed to a sheriff who kept his sex life private. At least Elaine enjoyed indulging Antoinette her sexual interests. Indulge and partake.

Hopefully the woman would not spoil Athalia’s first slice of joy in years.

“Natasha,” Antoinette continued, “has made progress. She, Sándor, and the Uratha have concocted a plan to learn about one of the more interesting tears. A dangerous plan.”

Daniel nodded. “I trust her, and Sándor.”

“But not Avery?”

He shrugged. “Do you?”

“No, I suppose not. I trust her heart, but she is... not cold enough to make difficult decisions.” And, naturally, had helped nurture Clara to become as equally an emotional and irrational leader. “But regardless, Avery will fight to protect Natasha. And if she does not, Sándor certainly will. The poor man is bound to us by his guilt.”

“A useful leash.”

“A savage one.”

Daniel nodded. “But not one of our making. If Sándor wants to break his back helping us, I say let him.”

There was wisdom in that. A cold, cruel wisdom. Antoinette and Daniel often traded positions on who was the more cruel in how they managed Dolareido. And where Sándor was concerned, Daniel was a touch crueler.

“And your childe has also discovered this.” Antoinette reached across the wooden desk, and pointed her laptop toward the man.

“Dolareido. And... a strange crystal drawn through it.”

“The location of tears, most found, some presumed. Miss Vola extrapolated, by eye.”

“She extrapolated this? Impressive.”

“Make sure to tell her that.” Like a wife, forcing her closed-off husband to expose his nurturing side to his daughter.

“I will. How goes your attempts to bind Black Blood?”

She groaned as she sat back. “You know it fairs poorly. Finding rituals to bind spirits is difficult enough. Finding a ritual capable of binding that creature? I waste my time.”

They both knew the search would be pointless. She could summon it, but had no way to pin it. And each time she summoned it, she felt the spirit gleamed more about her than she did of it.

“And getting Michael and Garry to follow the Roland rumor?”

“With such little time, I had to use the most obvious draw.”

Daniel raised a brow. “And that is?”

“My little Ventrue is going to find two angry Elders hot on his tail soon enough. I will need your eyes, and perhaps sword, in two or three days.”

“Sounds rough. What’s Jack said?”

“Jack... is not yet aware.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

“I will, tonight. But you know Jack. If he knew, he would find it difficult to manipulate Garry and Michael. My love is a poor liar.” Though, to both her joy and dismay, he grew more skilled at deception with each passing night.

“That’s why you love him.”

She smiled. “That it is.”

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~~Jack~~

“You killed Joe.” Michael tried to keep the grin off his face, but a hint of it showed through. Asshole.

Jack nodded. “I did.”

“And from the accounts, severely injured not only five other Carthians, but the sheriff as well.”

Jack winced at that. “We agreed to a fist fight. The curse is... better at fist fighting than it should be.”

“So it would seem.” Michael stepped up from the table, and paced back and forth between it and the large touch screen on the wall that showed an interactive map of Dolareido. “Bruce Vanna is also dead.”

“Terra Den’s incendiary grenade spouts a liquid around. I managed to save Miss Maiorie from it, not Mister Vanna.”

“Mister Vanna was older, stronger, and a larger asset to the Invictus.”

Jack met the man’s eyes, and stared. “Bruce was further. I didn’t know if I could save him. I knew I could save Vivienne.”

Michael returned the stare. Michael may have been afraid of the power of the curse, but that didn’t stop him from being who he was, a powerful Gangrel and elder who was now the ruler of the Invictus in Dolareido. To him, Jack was now a problem, but a valuable tool, so naturally he was going to do what he could to use the tool without exposing weakness to it.

It was the sort of situation that made Jack question whether he should get rid of the Ripper. If he did, yeah sure Michael wouldn’t look at him like a nuke ready to go off in his face, but he’d also be free to get revenge on Jack for all the disrespect Jack was not-so-subtly showing him.

Well, not entirely true. Michael couldn’t touch Jack without earning Antoinette’s wrath. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t orchestrate a situation Jack couldn’t survive.

Kindred sucked. The Danse Macabre sucked.

“The Tanvar building is a loss,” Michael said. “A multi-million dollar loss.”

“There isn’t much I can do to stop the Carthians from burning down buildings, Mister McDonald. With technology, they could throw one of those flame grenades from pretty far away, and the building’s gonna burn.” The attack on Xnomina made that obvious enough.

“They’re salting the earth.”

“Yes sir.” Because Garry hates you so much, he’s willing to burn down the shit you own, instead of take it for himself. “But, how many of those buildings were Joe’s doing? I don’t think Garry wanted Joe to go gung ho like he did.”

“Only the Tanvar building, as far as I know, can be blamed on Joe’s overzealousness.”

Damn.

“Then... we have a problem.”

“Indeed. If Garry continues on this path, the Prince will eventually interfere, but not before he’s damaged our financial basis considerably.”

“What do we do?”

“We deal with Terra Den.”

“Deal with, sir? Terra Den is a considerable portion of the city’s income. The Prince won’t be happy if we kill Jeremy Long.” What a wonderful world they lived in.

“Maybe. Terra Den is a corporation, Mister Terry, not Jeremy Long himself. If he dies, that doesn’t mean the corporation dies.”

True enough. Terra Den wasn’t a publicly traded company, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t other people in its chain that had serious holds over its shares. And of course, the fact Terra Den was basically a corrupt company meant that if Long died, someone else just as corrupt would take his place. Maybe that person would be a little more open to running the business like it used to, instead of getting involved with Garry. Or maybe, willing to get involved with the Invictus.

Michael was smart, and that made him damn frustrating to deal with.

“You want me to kill him.”

“I want you to investigate the option. Talk to him first, and see what he’s willing to do. He’s under the impression he’s given the Carthians a tool we don’t have, and that impression needs to change. Make him understand that if he helps Garry continue to escalate the situation, we will rise to meet him.”



Oh god, what a nice, fancy way of saying the Invictus would start blowing shit up.

“Will do, sir.”

“And Mister Terry. Understand that the Tanvar building loss is your failure, regardless of that idiot Joe’s kamikaze. Do not let another major location burn down because of your pacifism.”

The two glared at each other for a while, long enough for the silence itself to send a message, before Jack nodded, and left. There was something in Michael’s eyes Jack didn’t expect, a question his boss wanted to ask, but didn’t. Something about the curse, maybe? Jack couldn’t tell. Michael was angry with him though, over something he didn’t say.

Fucking lovely.

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“Ready?” Jessy asked.

Jack glanced to Damien. He nodded. Jack nodded. They were ready.

They knew this wasn’t going to end well, but it had to be done regardless. And with the death of Bruce and Joe, they all knew people weren’t going to pull punches. Gloves were off. Kindred were going to die.

It wasn’t the first time they’d been to the Terra Den building. It was where Jessy had punched Garry, turning a bad situation worse. It was where Eric — not with them tonight — confronted Long about his right hand man Montoya, and the death of his loan shark Pitt. It was where they learned Jeremy Long was a vampire, and Garry’s new childe.

The building was typical, as far as Dolareido business buildings with shady backgrounds went. A few warmer colors than the blacks of Xnomina or the Elysium Tower, but still, slick and modern. The office plants in the corners of rooms were real. To someone like Jeremy Long, aesthetics were important. He wanted people to know he was dangerous and sophisticated.

He really should have been a Ventrue, and Invictus.

But Garry saw something in him, something that gave him an animal edge. You had to have that animal edge to be worthy of a Gangrel siring you, according to Jessy, some part of you fully willing to get crazy when shit hits the fan. Gangrels didn’t look for potential childer who knew how to say one

thing while meaning another. Gangrels didn't look for potential childer who knew how to use money as a weapon, or intimidate someone by wearing the perfect suit. Gangrels looked for the sort of people that would, in the heat of a fight, not only throw fists until they saw stars, but were willing to use their teeth if someone was stupid enough to get too close to their mouths. The sort of people who shut off their brains and went psycho animal when they had to.

Garry siring Long always seemed strange, but it told Jack there was more to the man than they realized. Which made any Invictus nervous.

Long sat at his desk, dressed in a nice suit, and sporting an animal grin. Average height, and he filled the suit nicely. Chinese heritage, but born in the US. Short black hair, face shaved smooth, he had that eternally young, maybe sold his soul to a demon kinda look to him, considering the grin on his face.

To his left stood several thralls, sporting assault rifles. To his right stood several thralls, sporting anti-personnel shotguns. And at the office door the Right Hands just walked through, several thralls armed with shotguns and, hilariously, swords, let the three vampires in. Vampires with swords were deadly. Thralls? Even ghouls, stronger than normal humans, were laughably weak compared to vampires, let alone thralls. The fuck were they gonna do with a sword?

The shotguns though, those were a problem.

"Be aware," Long said, "that this room is being recorded and monitored. If you do anything strange, we will all die in fire."

Jack smirked. Quite the bluff, but the curse was strong enough to deal with fire. Though, maybe not an entire building on fire. They were several stories up, and the office didn't have windows. Less an office, more a cell. A fancy, beautiful cell, but Long definitely wanted anyone who came into his office to feel like they were trapped.

He wasn't lying, either. There were cameras in the corners of the room, and they moved a bit to follow Jessy as she paced around in the office. Cameraman were aiming them. Long trusted his employees quite a bit, if he was willing to give them a button that'd set the whole place on fire.

"Noted," Jack said. "You like fire a lot, for a vampire."

"It's a powerful tool." No accent, except for a pompous edge CEOs often seemed to have, like he was talking down to Jack.

"One mistake and it'll kill you."

“Yes, I am sure it would. ” Long tapped his fingers on his big desk as he met Jack’s eyes. Not afraid at all. Jack couldn’t exactly Dominate the man without it being a little obvious, especially since the man kept tapping his fingers on the desk. If Jack jumped into his mind, he’d stop doing that. Did he really have them all sitting on explosives, under the control of someone else, who’d detonate them if Long stopped tapping his fingers? Crazy.

“The fire is a problem,” Damien said.

Long chuckled. “For you.”

Jessy shook her head. “For everyone. You’re burning down the city.”

“You mean Garry is burning down the city. And hardly. Three buildings does not qualify as burning down the city, not in Dolareido. Are you aware of how many kine live in this city, Miss Herrington? Over four million. Buildings burn down.”

Jessy gave him the finger, but didn’t say anything. Long wasn’t wrong. It was true the Invictus and Carthians were causing property damage, but so far it hadn’t reached a level where the Prince would feel the need to intervene. Yet.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Jack said. “These incendiary grenades of yours are a problem, and I want you to stop making them.”

“No.” More tapping.

“You don’t think the Invictus could use fire, Mister Long? You don’t think we have the tech to put together a similar weapon?”

“I think you do. But I also think you realize burning Carthian property is a waste of time. What possible property target do you have that could affect the Carthians in any way if it were lost?”

Jack gestured at the room around them. “Uh...”

“You think you can destroy this building, Mister Terry? I let you in because you are no threat. I don’t care if you can summon a legion, and defend yourself from flame. You could not survive an inferno, and your legion is of no use here. If you tried, you would fail. And if you somehow succeeded, the damage you would cause to the Masquerade would be immense.”

This man was simultaneously full of himself, and paranoid. He was practically an elder already.

“We could burn this building down without being in it, you know.”

“I’d like to see you try.” And there it was. The Gangrel part of him.

“And Joe? Did Garry give you permission to give him some of those grenades?”

Long’s smile faded. “You killed Joe. Why should I tell you anything?”

“Joe killed Bruce. First, I might add.”

“Such is war.”

“That wasn’t war. That was an idiot man with a fucking delusion. And someone gave him a deadly weapon.”

“A molotov is just as deadly.”

“Bullshit. A molotov just splatters and quickly burns. That shit was like napalm, and unlike a fucking molotov cocktail, it didn’t come at me as a glass bottle with a burning rag attached to it. It was an innocuous little sphere.”

“Not innocuous enough, evidently. Thank you for the feedback. I’ll make sure future devices are less noticeable.”

This guy. This fucking guy. Jack stared at the man hard, ready to shatter his mind and turn him into a mindless puppet. But the man held his gaze as he tapped his finger. The best poker player in the world, or he was telling the truth about his defense measures.

This was definitely the sort of man who’d use his teeth in a fist fight if he had to.

“Jeremy Long, I am warning you. If you continue to bring fire to these skirmishes, the Invictus will respond in kind.”

“Then it’s a good thing the Invictus are the ones on the defense. It’s you who stands to lose territory.”

“Not true. We’ll take the Mirrden district back, but if we can’t, Michael is prepared to cause permanent damage.”

“Oh ho, permanent? Oh please, you have no leverage in this game.”

Jack stepped up to the man’s desk. Every thrall pointed their gun at him, and Jack ignored them.

“Xnomina has been in the business longer than Terra Den. The Invictus have been playing this game for a lot longer than you, or even Garry. You really think we can’t beat you at this?”

“I think you’re an old monster who’s gone too long unchallenged. Now, you’re fat, weak, and lazy, and the younger generation has to take you down.”

Jack didn't know much about the Uratha, but that story sounded oddly familiar. Eric said something about it. Father Wolf?

“Long, I'm giving you a chance. Stop helping Garry with the tech, or we'll make you.”

“No. Now, if that is all, get out.”

Well, this was a waste of time, except to learn that Long was smarter and deadlier than he had any right to be. Garry sired well.

Jessy snarled, but when Damien turned to leave, she followed. Jack followed last.

“And Mister Terry,” Long said. “Stop digging up Roland's family, would you? My sire does not appreciate you stirring up the past.”

Old Jack would have worn his surprise on his face. But after years of bullshit and hard lessons, Jack kept his gaze cold and steady as he met Long's, before he walked out the door, and took the elevator down with his friends. The fuck was that about?

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“Roland's past?” Jessy asked once they were out on the street. “Like... Michael's childe before me, Roland?”

“Yeah. Been doing a little digging.” But not into Roland's family. In fact, he didn't know a single thing about Roland's family. “Can't really talk about it.”

Damien and Jessy blinked at each other.

“Uh, what?” Jessy asked.

“Really, can't talk about it. It's... a weird situation.” The fuck were you up to, Antoinette?

Roland was Jack's best bet of getting Garry and Michael to trip up and make a mistake. It was the seed that had the two Gangrels hating each other so much, and if he could use it against them, he could maybe manipulate them with it. But if Antoinette was up to something that had people looking to Jack like he was up to something, that could very well bite him in the ass.

When in doubt, deny deny deny. Antoinette would tell him more when it made sense to.

Damien shrugged and pat Jessy on the shoulder. “If he says he can't talk about it, he can't talk about it.”

“Ugh, fine.” She gave him a sharp poke in the chest. “But make sure you call me if shit gets crazy, ok? You killed that fucker Joe and I wasn’t even there to see it.”

“Jessy, I nearly killed five other people. And I’m glad I didn’t.”

“What? Why? You don’t think that fucking bitch Bella deserves it? She’s been a thorn in my ass for decades, and I know a couple Invictus disappeared after a run-in with her.”

Jack sighed. He was tempted to ask about her past, if she’d killed any Carthians in her fifty years, directly or indirectly. Sometimes the little brawls Invictus and Carthians got into weren’t very gentle, and Julias told him plenty of stories about how they got pretty bad sometimes. Kindred died.

He stepped into a dark alley, and they followed.

“Jessy, I don’t want anyone to die, ok? I... Christ, you think I’m happy I killed him?”

“A bit, yeah. Joe was a douchebag. World is better off without him.”

Glaring, Jack snapped his eyes to Damien, but his friend shook his head dismissively.

“Jessy,” Jack said, “the fuck would Julias say?”

“Julias?” She glared at him, but after a few seconds her anger broke, and her gaze fell. “He’d say stop making things worse, and look for a way to get everyone on the same page.”

“Yeah, and that’s what I’m trying to do. I didn’t want to kill Joe, the fucking curse did. Bruce died too. Vivienne nearly died. And... christ, I’m just trying to get people to stop killing each other. Ok? This is the most stereotypical war hate shit I’ve ever seen. Garry isn’t Hitler, and Carthians aren’t nazis. Get me?”

“I get you I get you. But last I checked, the Carthians are coming at us hard, Jack, not the other way around.”

“They thought differently, when we took the Mirrden district from them those years ago.”

“No one died!”

“Jessy, I saw Joe’s eyes before I killed him. He was utterly convinced the Invictus... and Viktor and me by extension, were evil and needed to die. I can guarantee you Joe has lost friends to Invictus. He...” Jack looked down. “Enough, ok? Enough.”

Slowly, she nodded, and gave him a gentle tap on the shoulder. “Alright, I get you. Just, you kinda gave me the impression with Long that you were ready to go to war.”

If Jack had to go to war, he wouldn't be Jack for very long. He be the fucking Ripper, drowning the whole city in blood and ashes.

His phone buzzed. A message from the Prince.

~Expect contact from Roland's family soon.~

Uh, what? Roland's family? Dude died a hundred years ago, why would—oh god, what was Antoinette up to? She sent him that text message on their personal channel too, which wasn't exactly secure. They avoided sending anything other than romantic stuff on it.

Ok, time to visit Antoinette and see what the hell this Roland business was about.

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~~Eric~~

He could be doing something else, instead of risking his life like this. He could be back in his fancy apartment with his girlfriend. He could be showering with her, touching her. He could be relaxing in the hot tub with her. He could be going out for a night on the town with her. He could be taking her back to her place after she'd fed on one — or more — humans, getting her randy as all hell, and he could be spending the night fucking her amazingly huge, athlete's ass, at her request. He could be living the dream.

Instead, here he sat in wolf form in the Hisil, him and a bunch of Avery's pack. Jessy wasn't with him. She had to deal with the Carthians, defend borders, fight off punks like Joe. Except Joe was dead, and now the Carthians and Invictus were willing to open up with lethal force from the get go.

Which meant, while Eric sat here, waiting for Red Tide to make its move, his girlfriend was in mortal danger. Not unusual. She'd been in mortal danger plenty of times. But now she was in heavy, real, could die at any moment to an explosive hidden in a car danger. That idea irked him. He knew the only reason Michael hadn't shown up at his door with a dozen Kindred and demanded Eric help them fight the Carthians was because of Jessy. If she died, Michael would probably drag his ass into the war.

Course, at that point, Eric would happily join. Kill the Carthians who killed the best thing to ever happen to him? Sure.

He growled, and forced the thoughts out of his mind. Focus. Him and the pack sat in the shadow of a building near the edge of the city, the outer edge of Devil's Corner, hidden in Natasha's Cloak. Some of the wolves like Art could hide themselves, and Sándor was somehow able to hold so perfectly still, he stop registering as a living entity to Eric's wolf senses. Gargoyle, yeah.

It was quiet. The strange sky, this far from the city's center, showed its beautiful stars and oddly colored clouds. Few spirits wandered out here, the edge of the city; they were drawn to where humans stirred chaos instead. Which meant it was strange to see the red wraiths and their massive claws floating about at the city's edge, guarding the glowing tear. They should have been in the city, guarding Black Blood's territory.

Which was why Sándor, and everyone else agreed it was important to examine the tear. It was either a very clever diversion by Black Blood, or legitimate.

Eric looked over to Clara. Her, Caleb, Noah, Matt and Art, Natasha, and Sándor were there with Eric. The rest of the pack were working with Red Tide, deeper in South Side, to stir up some sort of trouble. Avery didn't know what that trouble would be, which meant the rest of them could only sit here and—

The city erupted with noise. Everyone looked down the street toward South Side, but the winding road and tall buildings blocked their view. They could hear it though. Crashing, smashing, and roars.

They all looked up as a cloud of debris shot into the air, and spread, almost like a mushroom cloud, with bits of red mixed in.

"Holy sh-shit," Tash whispered. Props to her for keeping the Cloak up, because the sound rushed out to hit them, along with heavy vibration. A building had just collapsed.

Roars. Alien screams and shrieks. The oddly colorful sky over South Side darkened, and red splashed a quarter mile into the air. Clouds swirled and crashed down, disappearing behind the distant buildings, before sending another shock wave of vibration and sound their way.

Red Tide and Black Blood were fighting.

Well, if there was anyway Red Tide could create a distraction, this was it. It wasn't like the two hadn't fought before. Street-Tail King was happy to manipulate things from the shadows, and go for easy wins, but Red Tide was a big, angry, powerful spirit. Far as Eric knew, it rose up from the centuries of violence hidden in Dolareido, from even before Antoinette and her buddies showed up. Something to do with the blood, the way Dolareido attracted it, attracted vampires, attracted its weird, unspoken violence. Usually unspoken.



Sometimes it was easy to forget — he'd been born and lived here his whole life after all — Dolareido was a strange city. No wonder Luna took an interest.

Clara took two paw steps toward the noise, froze, growled, and looked back toward the tear they were scouting. Slowly, she looked to Eric, and the steady look in her eyes said it all: she wanted to help Avery.

Eric wanted to, too. They weren't even his pack, and he wanted to. He didn't know what Avery would do, now that Red Tide was causing a ruckus. Black Blood had made it clear she wasn't to interfere with his city, and if she did, he'd get his hands dirty. So the fuck was Avery going to do? She should have been here, with him and the others, in case shit hit the fan and they needed her.

That's what Clara was thinking, and it was quickly becoming what Eric was thinking. Say one thing for the bitch, Avery could get shit done.

The explosions grew closer. All six wolves and one vampire crouched low as a dust cloud rushed out onto the street, another crash of sound preceding it and slamming over the group with enough impact to have them shaking in its quake. Sándor didn't move an inch.

The explosions grew closer again, until enormous chunks of rubble flew into the air, and smashed into the street where they could see it. Still a ways away, but close enough it wasn't hidden by the winding street and buildings anymore.

They all froze until they looked like Sándor, as an enormous, black-tinted skeletal arm reached into the sky, body hidden by buildings, and slammed down. The city shook, and more rubble scattered skyward before raining down on everything within a hundred yards. Holy shit. But Black Blood's fury was met with an equally big, red tentacle, something that looked like it was made of blood and crimson leather, and it swept through the air before crashing down against a building out of their sight as well. Same effect. The whole city shook. Red Tide was not fooling around.

Eric had managed to avoid the giant kraken creature and its weird half-blood body in all his hunts. It didn't take many trips into the Hisil to learn that Black Blood and Red Tide were two juggernauts battling over the city the same way Godzilla might. Big, strong, and unstoppable. Avery was smart to avoid engaging them directly. With titans like them, you had to find out their bans and banes first, and smart assholes like Black Blood were good at hiding them.

Everyone in Dolareido either gave those two their room, or served them. Avery and her pack were the exception, because they were all apparently suicidal.

Sure enough, as the explosive battle loomed closer, the red wraiths circling the tear on the outskirts of the city headed toward them. Black Blood calling for reinforcements. Except one stayed behind.

Red wraiths spent a lot of time hovering around as wisps, clouds of red and black smoke. But when they needed to be involved and hands on, they solidified. Hissing creatures, they had human-like torsos, but no face, just a flat black mass with red demon eyes that glowed. Long arms with equally long claws, but no legs. They floated, like ghosts.

They were called red wraiths, or blood wraiths, cause each of the obsidian, hovering legless creature with claws, also looked like they were wearing a strange cloak or robe of dripping red. Literally dripping, as if they had wounds that never closed.

The gang expected this. Even had a plan on how to deal with it. Rush it while protected by Tash's cloak, and kill it. Avery's pack wasn't really good at subtlety.

All wolves looked to Tash, and she glanced back to Sándor. The man pushed off the wall of the building, and slowly, casually, got into a runner's stance. You didn't need Uratha senses to tell the man was calm, like this was just another Wednesday for him. No increase in heart rate, no jitters, nothing.

They took off in a dead sprint for the spirit. It was out in the open at the end of a street that merged into the desert, and they didn't know how effective the Cloak would be against it. Better to come out running.

Good thing they did. They still had fifty feet to go before the spirit turned its eyes to face them. They widened as realization set in, and it turned to flee.

And then it flew up.

Ok, kink in the plan, kink in the plan! The fuck were they supposed to do if the creature could fly? They—

Sándor swept past them, over them, and into the sky. A dark silhouette erupted from the man's back, utterly massive wings that looked colossal on his frame, and they spread to catch the air. They launched him with a single flap that sent the wind out in an explosion around them, and Sándor rode the wind like he'd done this a million times before.

He came down on the spirit hands first, thirty feet in the air, and the two came crashing down with a heavy thud. Sándor landed on top, and for a single second, the silhouette of the gargoyle was visible again, its titanic limbs, and its huge claws. And he used them on the spirit.

It only took a single second for the crew to catch up once he landed, but by then, the spirit was already wounded and dying. It slashed out, but Eric bit into one wrist, Caleb bit into the other, and they ripped its hands off as it flailed. It died a few seconds later.

“Mission... s-successful?” Tash asked.

The wolves all looked around. Natasha quickly wrapped them in her Cloak again, but there was a lot of people in their group, and they’d literally just had a man fly through the air. It’d been quick thinking, but if anyone had been watching, they’d have seen the gargoyle, the pack, and the vampire.

But then, two giants were fighting in the city, not too far from where the group was. And considering the ridiculous amount of destruction Eric could hear, it was a safe bet all nearby spirits were either watching the destruction, or hiding for their lives.

“Get rid of the evidence,” Sándor said, gesturing to the body. Not an order. The man simply asked in the most deadpan way possible. Caleb didn’t hesitate, grabbed the spirit, and carted it off. It’d disperse into essence soon enough, or some rat bottom-feeder choir would find and devour it.

Clara and Eric hopped up onto the gas station, transformed back into human form, and stood near the tear that hovered at about head level. Sándor and Tash joined them. Noah, Matt, and Art backed off and returned to the city edge to hide in shadows. If someone else did spot them, hopefully they could do something, but even with Red Tide distracting the whole damn city, they probably only had minutes.

They all looked at Sándor, and waited.

“W-What do you see?” Tash asked.

Sándor stared at the hole. It hovered about five feet over the gas station’s roof, perfect staring height, and the dude did just that. Stared, with wide eyes.

And this close, Eric could understand why. They all stepped up closer, and the world went silent as the four—three of them stared into the endless, golden oblivion the tear was exposing. One of them was a bit too short to see.

“Um... uh...”

Eric held out his arm, elbow bent and forearm up, and created a hook for Tash. She smiled up at him, reached up, put a foot against his thigh, and half hung from his arm, half pressing her weight into his leg, so she could get an extra twenty inches height. So damn light, he barely noticed her boot pressing into him.

“W... Wow,” she said. Yeah, wow. “Sándor, you’ve... n-never been there before?”

“No.”

“D-Do you know what, er, where it is?”

“No.”

A lie, maybe? Sándor had some idea, but he didn't want to tell them, judging from the expression on his face.

“Can we go in?” Clara asked.

Sándor shook his head. “No.”

“Why not? I mean, we've been in dream realms, and we've even been to the underworld. Can't—”

Sándor reached out, and gently pushed down the hand she'd been raising.

“You haven't been to the underworld,” he said, “not the underworld you mean. You've been to a realm of ghosts. It is not the same thing.”

“Ok, so... what? What's that mean?”

“It means... there are places too high, and too low, for living things to visit.” He held out a hand and moved it close to the strange white oblivion, but as his hand grew closer to the tear, he winced. The endless gold and white of whatever they stared into didn't like his hand, and tiny waves of white struck out against it.

Instant smells of burning. Everyone pulled their heads back and stared at Sándor as he casually lowered his hand, burn marks on his palm. That had to hurt, but the man barely reacted. Just, lowered his hand as he stared into the white before them.

“This shouldn't be here,” he said.

Clara choked on a forced chuckle. “Yeah, we know. That's why we're investigating.”

“It shouldn't be here. It can't be here. It...”

“Can it take us to another tear or not?” Eric asked. “Or, you know, same tear, just tearing into another place on Tash's map.”

“It could. It probably does, but we can't go there. Nothing living, nothing physical, no spirit or ghost or Changeling or...” He shook his head. “We can't go through.”

“Then we're done here,” Clara said. “Avery is going to be pissed.”

Pissed was an understatement. Investigating the tear had basically meant go through it, and learn more about whatever was happening, and how to stop it. It might have taken them to a new spot to put on the map. But from how it reacted to Sándor's hand, it'd incinerate them in white fire if they tried.

Well, fuck.

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"Holy shit," Clara said. "You guys ok?"

Avery groaned as she slowly sat herself on the couch. "Fine."

They all went to Eric's apartment. Lot bigger than Avery's, good for a meeting. Plus, he had to feed Kat.

Kat didn't mind the company of course, and she took her time visiting each person for her expected pets and scratches. Which was a lot. Avery's pack of a dozen, Sándor, and Tash, each got a visit from Kat, even Avery herself, who glared down at the dumb feline as she got comfortable on Avery's lap.

Avery, David, and Carter all sat on his main couch, each of them pretty beat up, with torn up clothes that showed they got into a fight of some kind or another. But they weren't bleeding, so it couldn't have been that bad if they could heal from it. Even werewolves took longer than an hour to heal from the really nasty wounds, the sort caused by silver or powerful spirits. Or chainsaws, according to Carter.

"Eric, why is your cat... doing that." Avery gestured down at Kat, and how she snuggled onto the woman's lap.

"Because she sees that I don't mind you." Though he doubted Kat actually cared what Eric thought. "And because you obviously don't like her."

"... yeah, I don't like her."

Tash giggled. "B-Because you're ignoring her, she likes you."

Avery threw up her hands. A big enough gesture to scare off any other cat. But Kat was Kat, and she gave no fucks. If anything, she purred louder.

"Your cat is—"

“Brain damaged, I know,” Eric said. Of course, the moment he opened the drawer with the cans of wet cat food, Kat meowed and came running. By the time he had a can in his hand, she was already rubbing against his legs.

“What happened?” Clara asked.

“Red Tide’s distraction was fucking chaos. Red wraiths showed up, and Red Tide started attacking anyone nearby. That included us. Black Blood itself showed up, and... I guess Red Tide attacked us so Black Blood wouldn’t suspect us, but Red Tide pulls no punches. Some other spirits got involved, trying to take advantage of the chaos; fuckers hate us.”

Spirits did seem to default to hating Uratha. It made hunts into the Hisil pretty fucking annoying, but there was also a strange thrill to being universal hated, and feared. Uratha were strong, and could deal with spirits in ways most things couldn’t. But it also meant spirits might do something like get involved in a fight if they saw an opportunity to kill a werewolf. The respect and power said spirit might earn, if they managed to devour one of the pack, would be huge.

Bunch of assholes.

“We didn’t know what Red Tide would do,” Carter said. “I don’t think it knew what it’d do. But it worked... right?”

All eyes fell to Sándor. Eric, in strategic brilliance, took extra long scooping food out of the can for Kat, in the corner of the room, out of the crossfire.

Sándor shook his head. “We got close enough to touch it. But... we can’t cross it. And I can’t go there... ever.”

Avery raised a brow. “Come again?”

“There are realms,” Sándor said, “that we can visit. The realm of spirits, you know well. The realm of dreams, Begotten know well. There are others. The realm of ghosts. The brighter places of the dream Begotten avoid. Darker places of the Great Below. You can go higher in the place of dreams, and higher to places above that. You can go deeper in the Great Below, where... where more than the dead die.”

More than the dead die. For a stoic, quiet man, Sándor could be damn poetic when he wanted to be. Creepy.

“I can go high in the dream world, and deep in the land of the dead. But...” He shuddered as he looked down at his burned palm. “That tear cut into some place far above the dream, far above the places above those places. As if Black Blood had cut into...”

They all stared at him as the room grew deadly silent, until the only noise was Kat’s licking and munching.

Heaven. He was talking about Heaven, or something like it.

Avery shrugged. “Ok, so, what’s that mean to us?”

“It means... I don’t know. It means whatever Black Blood’s planning isn’t... as small a plan as we thought.”

“Small!? It’s trying to tear everything down and—”

“That’s small scale, compared to... compared to what I was looking into.”

Avery half got up, winced, groaned, and sat back down. “Explain then, for fuck’s sake.”

“I can’t go into the realm that tear cut into.”

“Yeah, I get it. So?”

“Monsters go where we want. There isn’t anywhere I can’t go. If there’s a door, I can open it.” His eyes hardened as he looked at Avery. “Anywhere. But... I couldn’t go where that tear went.”

“W-What Sándor means,” Tash said, “is... we thought Black Blood was maybe trying to tear down the Gauntlet, right? And then w-we realized, maybe it’s trying to do more, cause the tears cut into other places too. Other ‘realms’,” Natasha air-quoted realms, “that, um, are nearby?” She looked to Sándor, and he nodded. “Like, m-maybe it was going to turn everything into a big mixing pot, mix all the realms together. But... b-b-but if Black Blood is making tears to... to sacred places, maybe it’s not about that?”

“Sacred places?” Clara asked.

“Places we’re not allowed to go,” Sándor said. “Places only... souls can go, I guess.”

Avery laughed. “You guess? Thought you Begotten knew everything.”

“... we don’t.”

Well, that silenced the room pretty quick. Except for Kat. Finished, the damn cat jumped back on the couch, and without hesitation, once again got comfy on Avery’s lap, completely oblivious to the cold blanket smothering everyone in the room.

Sighing, Avery eventually set a hand on Kat's head, and absentmindedly pet her as she looked down at the cat in thought.

"What's that mean for us?"

Sándor slowly shook his head. "I'm not sure. But... I think, according to the ritual symbol Tash drew, the center of the ritual is probably not the point we need to worry about. It wouldn't make sense if the ritual is a 3D shape, anyway. It's probably a point above or below, finishing the crystal shape, points where Black Blood is... reaching, maybe using points higher and lower, to reach even higher, and even lower."

"You said those places were dangerous," Noah said.

Right, Sándor had said there were places in the dream, and in the underworld, that were 'above' and 'below' the six places he'd found in both realms. He could go to those places, but said they were dangerous. And apparently, the tear they found tonight, cut into a place even higher. Fucking confusing.

"They are dangerous. But we don't have a choice, do we?" the Begotten said.

No, they didn't have a choice. Eric sighed as he sat down on his couch arm by Avery.

"Guess we go scouting," he said. "And if we're going into deep places, or really high places, we can't do that without your help, Sándor. Or maybe the others."

The others had avoided involving themselves in this tear business, except for Azamel supposedly being the first one to warn the Prince something was up. Other than that, Athalia, Fiona, and Mark didn't get involved. Probably on order too, since it'd become clear Black Blood was their enemy, and Azamel didn't want them getting hurt. Sándor apparently didn't agree.

When Azamel died, Sándor would be the big bad Begotten. They'd listen to him. Maybe then, he'd ask them to help?

Of course, the idea of Fiona getting neck deep in dangerous shit irked Eric. He liked Fiona. He still felt a bit guilty about touching her; way too young and bubbly for him. Sure, she was a lot smarter and more mature than she appeared, a lot like Jessy. But in ways, wasn't.

It was funny. Damien was older than Eric, but a better match for the young woman.

"I should go alone," Sándor said.

Caleb laughed. "You know that's bullshit, dude."



Clara nodded. “You take a group of us to scout a location, and we’ll go together. Maybe not the whole pack, but I know Tash is going, and she’s still got the boys on a leash. I’ll probably go.” A quick glance to her leader confirmed. “Noah and Caleb too.”

“And me, I guess,” Eric said. Because hey, if everyone was jumping off a cliff, there had to be a good reason.

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~~Damien~~

Two days later.

Bella, Steve, Kass, and Garner all being injured meant the Invictus had an opening. Much as Jack did his best to keep the peace, the ramifications of the curse’s actions meant the Invictus had the opportunity to push an advantage. And they did. Predictably, the Carthians pushed back, and they pushed hard.

And this time, people did die.

The Right Hands weren’t there to see it, but a couple Carthians and Invictus died. In fire. Kindred on site said it was an accident, that one of the Carthians had one of those devices from Terra Den, and didn’t plan to use it, but the brawl grew extreme. Kindred were using powers left and right in the basement of an old apartment building in Devil’s Corner; officially abandoned, thankfully.

Buildings in Devil’s Corner were built in that strange time period when humans thought it was a good idea to build large buildings with wood and brick. The result was extreme.

Damien stared up at the burning building as the fire department arrived. No delay this time, they arrived in droves, and immediately took to the ten-floor building with enormous geysers of water. But the building was doomed. It burned and burned, and Damien stared at the flame from across the street atop another building.

Vicky and Parker stood beside him.

“This was one of your dens?” Damien asked. They’d been the ones to describe what happened.

“Yeah,” Vicky said, eyes wide as she looked the burning building up and down. “We had... a bunch of prostitutes working here. We got them out, barely.”

“More kine you enthralled with Jacob’s help?” Good to remind them he hadn’t forgotten those two had a strange artifact that helped them enthrall kine, an artifact they got from Jacob.

Parker grunted and threw Damien a hard glare, but he sighed and nodded as he looked back to the burning building.

“Jacob had nothing to do with this attack. He helped us out, and we let him dig his fingers into the kine in the area. This, this was the Carthians.”

Much as Damien wanted to interrogate the man further about what Jacob might have been up to with their help, he was right. This fire was because the Carthians and Invictus got into a fight, and it went bad, just like Jack knew it would.

And there wasn’t any chance Jacob let either of these two in on any secrets. They were hedonists, concerned only with their own pleasure, nothing more.

Damien believed them. If this was one of their brothels like they said it was, they didn’t want to lose it. The war was reaching out further and further, and now it was affecting everyone. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before it reached out and affected Kindred who stayed out of reach of most issues. Leauvion and her acting troupe, for example.

The Begotten, for another.

He shook his head. No way the fighting would drift into their neighborhood. Sure, all Kindred used the tunnels, but the Begotten were well out of the way of the most commonly used tunnels. But then again, fights were chaotic, could lead to chases, and...

Damien pulled up his phone, and called Jack.

No answer.

First reaction: mild panic. The Right Hands were all on call with each other with this war on. The only reason they could have for turning off the notifications on their phones, or ignoring them, was they were in some sort of stealth mission, or they were indisposed. Or dead. So he called Jessy.

“Yellow.”

“Jessy. I’m here in Devil’s Corner.”

“Shit, yeah. That apartment building on fire. Our fault?”

“Carthian and Invictus brawl turned ugly.”

“Shiit.”

“One of Vicky and Parker’s brothels.”

“Shiiiiit.”

“Four dead. Two Invictus, Donny and Carlyle. Two Carthians as well.”

“Shi—”

“I get it. And Jack isn’t answering his phone.”

“Jack did seem a little preoccupied last I talked to him. And we know there’s no chance he’s dead.”

That was true. Much as Jack had to worry about with the amount of enemies he’d made, there was essentially zero chance the man was dead. Unless someone found him with a high powered snipe rifle from an extreme distance and took out his head, or hit him with a nuke, the curse wasn’t going away any time soon.

“I—hold on.” A message from Jack.

~I’m gonna do something really stupid, and I need you and Jessy to head down to the Carthian district and stir up trouble. I need a distraction.~

“Jack... is asking us to do something.”

Jessy laughed. “Of course he is. You know we’re both seniors on him, right? By fifty fucking years?”

“The boy has a knack for tactical reasoning and quick thinking.”

“Pfft, I guess. What’s he want?”

Damien looked at Vicky and Parker. They were both watching him, and making no efforts to hide their eavesdropping.

“Let me call you back.”

“Fine fine.”

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“We seriously gonna do this alone?” Jessy asked.

“Yes.”

“Why can’t we ask for help?”

“Because Jack doesn’t want us killing anyone. And now that people are dying, we can’t tell fellow Invictus to avoid killing.”

Jessy grumbled as she leaned over the building’s rooftop railing. Most rooftops had them in Dolareido, railings or raised edges, as if Antoinette and the others knew they’d be frequently used by both Kindred and kine when they built the city. Considering the woman’s intelligence, she probably did know.

“Can’t believe Carlyle and Donny are dead. Holy shit, I was talking to them last night.”

Damien shook his head. “Don’t. If you get angry about it, you’re going to kill the Carthians we’re supposed to be distracting.”

Jessy frowned at him, but it didn’t last long. Eventually she relented and nodded before looking back out to the crowd.

“Eric says the shit they’re dealing with is getting even bigger than we thought.”

It was Damien’s turn to frown. “The moment we’re done with this war, we have to shift targets.”

“Done with this war? Yeah, I guess. But Garry and Michael have been at each other’s throats for a long time, you know? And even if they weren’t, Carthians and Invictus are like oil and water. Shit just doesn’t mix.”

That was true. Even if Jack managed to find a way to end this war, and return Garry and Michael to a truce, it’d be temporary. Somehow, somehow, they’d start fighting again. Maybe it would be better to try and wipe the Carthians out entirely?

Not possible. Not only was Garry smart enough to have defensive plans, likely extreme ones, even if he did die along with his covenant, other Kindred would move to Dolareido and restart the movement. Unlike the Lancea et Sanctum, there was no shortage of young Kindred who felt their anarchist ideals were a better fit for Kindred society.

“We do what we can for now.”

“I guess.” She sighed as she rotated her shoulders, getting ready for a fight. “God, I want this shit over. I want to go back to Eric, and get stuffed by some giant werewolf dick, you know?”

Damien slapped his forehead. “Must you?”

“Ha! Come on, I know you’ve been fucking a spider monster girl. You can’t give me shit.”

“Fiona talks to you too much.”

“Fiona talking to me is half the reason you’re such a lucky man.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Jessy snorted on a laugh. “What, you think Fiona learned how to do that thing she did last night on her own?”

Damien squirmed. “You—”

“I didn’t touch her, calm down. Haven’t touched her since that night at the club with Eric.”

Laughing, Jessy reached out and gave him one of her patented buddy punches in the shoulder.

“Anything else you want to try with her? I can give her tips. I can give you tips.”

“No thanks.”

“Aw. You doing that guy thing, where you don’t talk about shit?”

“I’m doing that guy thing where I keep the details of my sex life private.”

“Well that’s no fun. Come on, talk to Eric about the sexy stuff! Trade pointers. Share measurements.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Haha! I’m fucking kidding, about the measurements thing anyway. Don’t mean you can’t talk to each other about what things girls seem to like and shit.”

“I saw far too much of what you like through your window.”

“Well if you didn’t go spying on the city with a fucking telescope all the time, you wouldn’t have seen it! And it’s not like you had to gawk while I enjoyed my ghouls.” She turned, put her back to the railing, and rested her elbows on it as she grinned at him. “Bet you enjoyed the show, though.”

He rolled his eyes. “You are attractive, I admit that.”

“Damn right.”

“But I never indulged myself watching you, if that’s what you were thinking.”

“Ha. I was wondering, yeah. Lot of people do, you know? Jerk off — or jill off — while watching the windows. That’s half the fun of putting on a show, knowing people are watching and enjoying it.”

Her smile faded. “Much as I love Eric, and the sex is fucking great, I do kinda miss having more legs in the bed, you know?”

“I don’t know.”

She grinned. “I can guarantee if you asked Fiona, she’d consider it. Girl is just as much a hornball as me. You lucky fucker.”

Fiona was definitely that. And maybe in some sort of strange, distant future, Damien would do something as crazy as a threesome. But not yet.

“She’s not the barrier there. I am.”

“Ah man, you too?”

“Too? Eric?”

“Yeah. I mean, I can tell he’d love to ram that werewolf dick into some kine girl I’ve got my teeth in and legs around.” She fisted the air, mimicking a sexual motion. “But he’s hesitant. PTSD from shit with his wife, and probably from living the rich life only for it to all to go up in smoke.”

Damien sighed. Why were they having this conversation? Jessy reaching out and trying to be his friend, he supposed. Jack and Damien talked about books and psychology when they wanted to have a fun chat, not sex. At least, not usually sex, and they both did their best to navigate the topic without too many details.

But not Jessy.

“We should trade sex tapes! Tash and I do it all the time.”

“All the time?”

“Yeah. Got a few vids of her now. Holy shit that little thing can take a pounding! And she makes my sex tapes look like cheap corner store garbage. Which, I mean, they kinda are. I just set up the laptop and point it at me and stream shit sometimes. Tash though, she’s gone full blown porn director. Fancy cameras and lighting and everything.”

Sometimes, just sometimes, in a tiny little dark corner in his mind, Damien could understand Lucas’s desire to purge the city of deviancy.

“I—”

“And don’t tell me you got a problem with public sex. Fiona told me about that time you fucked her in Bloodlust. Jen and Beatrice showed up and you fucked her anyway, right?”

“I... that...”

Jessy winked at him. “I know all and see all.”

“You’re a gossip.”

“So’s Fiona.”

That, was true. Jessy’s gossiping annoyed him, but Fiona’s gossiping was cute and endearing. Or more likely, he was being biased.

“I don’t plan to have anyone else in our bed any time soon. And Fiona is happy with that.”

“Buuuuuuuuuuuuut?”

“... but I imagine you’ll be telling all this to her later.”

“Of course.”

“And you’ll put the idea of filming a sex tape in her head. Any idea she’ll love.”

“Undoubtedly. That little redhead is a perfect fit for Dolareido.”

Lord help him.

“I... agree. She is.”

“Ha, right? And those tits, my god. Gs?”

“I’m not telling you her cu—you already know, don’t you?”

“Now you’re catching on.” She gave him a pat on the arm. “I got a vid from Jack, too. Couple, actually. Want?”

“I know, and no thank you.” That would add a new angle of awkwardness to their friendship he did not want. “Can we focus on the mission please?”

“Ugh, fine fine.”

“... am I insane, or am I noticing a pattern, that the women in Dolareido are very, very... lustful?”

“Dude, you don’t think every girl out there wants to get railed? That the idea of getting thrown over a table and just fucking pounded doesn’t get her wet? You even pay attention to what erotic books and movies make the most money, and who’s buying the tickets?” She shrugged. “Girls are usually just more careful who they share this with, and the words they use. Not in Dolareido, though. Fuck that noise. Girls can be just as shameless as the guys. My favorite part of the city.”

Dolareido. Special for so many strange reasons.

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Jessy kicked in the door of one of the apartment buildings, and they both went in, guns blazing. Literally. Damien kept his pistol in his left hand, sword in his right, and fired several shots into the walls of the building. The heavy gauge rounds would penetrate the walls and cut into the various rooms on the bottom floor, as well as announce their presence. No fear of unwanted deaths. Only Kindred lived in this building.

“The fuck!?” the one Kindred in the lobby said. But she went silent when Damien snapped his gun in her direction, and put a bullet through her heart. A neonate, a fledgling at that, some young girl who’d likely been given guard duty for this nest of young vampires.

The cruel, harsh reality of being a Kindred: age mattered. Fledglings could barely function, neonates were weak, ancilla were strong, and elders were gods. The girl fell over, groaning and crying, unused to pain, but she’d recover eventually.

Jessy came in with a shotgun. Damien had insisted otherwise, but relented when Jessy promised she wouldn’t aim for any torsos or heads. He wasn’t entirely convinced. Yes, they both believed in Jack’s cause, but Jessy had issues with the Carthians. Damien had abandoned his issues with them with the death of Lucas, but Jessy was probably itching for an opportunity for some payback.

But he trusted her. Barely, but he did.

Kindred responded quickly. They poured out of the apartments and into the hall, leaving Jessy and Damien both aiming down a hallway filled with Kindred and open doors.

“Y’all have seen this movie before!” Jessy shouted. “Love John Woo!” Movie? What? Who?

Jessy threw herself to the side, and unloaded several shots from the shotgun as she did, mid air. Pellets ripped and tore walls, opened doors, the tile floor, everything. True to her word, she didn’t aim directly for anyone, but that didn’t mean the spray didn’t catch some unlucky Kindred in the arms, legs, or even the chest and head. They screamed as they fell back, but none took serious damage, relative to what Kindred could handle.

Problem. More than fledglings lived here. Neonates with a decade or three under their belt came out of their apartments, and they didn’t hesitate, unlike their young friends. Armed with pistols and shotguns of their own, they pointed directly at Jessy, and fired as she scrambled. The small lobby



contained only a single staircase, and the path of apartments, but thankfully the hall entrance was smaller than the lobby, giving Damien and Jessy a wall to hide behind. He took the left. She took the right.

“Come and get it, bitches!” She poked her head out long enough to fire again, before quickly ducking behind cover as a hail of bullets came her way. The building’s outer walls may have been concrete, but the interior was wood, and bits and pieces of it and drywall alike flew past her.

Which gave Damien the opportunity to poke his head out and fire a couple shots. The hall was a mess of splintered doors used as cover and Kindred firing through the holes Jessy’s shotgun had made, but Damien managed to spy a few opportune shots. One Kindred screamed as they lost a toe. Another fell back, hollering as a bullet ripped through their knee.

Attacking an apartment building filled with fledglings and neonates was one of the greatest insults a covenant could give another. A good distraction. A good idea from Jack.

It was a fellow Mekhet that made a dash down the hall as Damien and Jessy reloaded, that got the worst of it. The moment she passed through the arch, Damien slashed down with his sword, and her right hand flew up into the air along with her shotgun. A moment later, it burst into a cloud of ash as it landed on the floor along with the gun.

The woman screamed and fell, and rolled on the floor, clutching the stump where her wrist used to be. She’d regrow the hand eventually, but Damien did not envy her the pain. He knew what it felt like.

Jessy, on the other hand, was not feeling so empathetic. She looked down at the screaming woman with a knowing eye, but a glance back up at Damien stayed her hand.

She spun around, and blasted a shell up at the stairs over their heads.

“Don’t think you can sneak up on me motherfuckers!” She fired several more shells up at the stairs, and pellets ricocheted in a chaotic mess. But most of the hail of metal sneaked through the steps, and the Kindred above shrieked and yelled as they jumped back.

Part one of the distraction, complete. Damien nodded to Jessy and then to the door behind them. She did the same, and the two of them ran for the exit they’d come in from literally two minutes earlier.

They weren’t in North Side. Close, but not quite. The Carthian half of South Side was filled with people, but they mostly stayed in bed at night, unlike the other half of South Side. Run down buildings and apartments, but not as bad as Devil’s Corner. Damien and Jessy were mostly in the clear to make a ruckus without accidentally killing any humans. Mostly.

But the Carthians knew that too. As Damien and Jessy ran back out into the street, bullets rained down on them from above as a few eager Kindred poked their heads over rooftop ledges. Submachine guns. Damien and Jessy slid into cover behind a car, and covered their heads as the sounds of metal slamming into metal at high speed deafened them.

“Dude, Cloak us!”

“A little hard to do when we’re being shot at!”

She rolled her eyes, poked her head up over the car, and shot up at the building across the street. The Kindred above ducked back into cover, and used a different tactic: aiming over the rooftop edge without actually looking. Which meant bullets went everywhere.

“Fucking hell man, Cloak us!”

“Give me a moment, for fuck’s sake! I—” He pointed his pistol at the door of the apartment building they’d just left, and fired several bullets, each whizzing past Jessy’s head and crashing into the metal door frame. The two Kindred about to stick their heads out jumped back into safety, but a moment later they came out just enough to return fire.

Jessy holstered her shotgun, grabbed the passenger door of the car they hid behind, ripped it off, and turned it into a shield. With left hand now preoccupied, she took out her pistol, and fired through its window at the two Kindred trying to get out of the apartment building.

“Do something!” she shouted.

The panic was half fake, half real. They had to be a distraction. According to Jack, they had to be a very obvious distraction, and obviously a distraction. The damn boy didn’t elaborate, and now Damien wished he’d forced him to, because now bullets came at him from above and beside, and the last place he wanted to die was beside Jessy in the middle of a pointless firefight.

Using the Cloak under duress was not easy. It was like trying to do a card trick, while being shot at. But Damien and Daniel had trained plenty, and that included using Obfuscate while being assaulted. Damien closed his eyes for a moment, blocked out the insane onslaught of sound, and summoned his vitae.

He grabbed Jessy’s shoulder, and focused. With vitae pouring up into his core, he forced it out into the world around them, and over him, Cloaking himself and his partner in its power.

“Alright, let’s go. Next target.”

“Christ, Jack owes me a hundred porn vids for this.” No longer shooting, Jessy put the door down, holstered the pistol and drew the shotgun, and followed him.

The Cloak of Night was not perfect. It was limited by two factors: his talent and abilities, but also the eyes of whoever he was trying to fool. A drunkard was easy to fool. A hardboiled detective with several decades of service would be a hard set of kine eyes to deceive. Vampire eyes currently shooting at the target trying to Cloak themselves, were borderline impossible to trick. But Damien was skilled, quite skilled, and both he and his partner managed to escape from behind cover as the assaulting Kindred suddenly found their targets difficult to see.

Difficult, but not impossible. Their eyes would glide off Damien and Jessy, or see nothing but a hazy blur where the two were, but they still had some idea of where they were. And the only thing that kept the Cloak from breaking, was Damien constantly reapplying it, which took vitae. He couldn't do it forever, and the Carthians kept shooting at their general location regardless.

Jessy was no Mekhet or Daeva, but she was fast, and she kept up with Damien as he sped up. Their jog turned into a run, run into sprint, and sprint into a gallop no human could match. But they were pinned down, with more Carthians poking their heads out windows to lay waste to the area they thought Damien and Jessy were with bullets, bullets, and more bullets.

Step two: get up on a roof, and get the Carthians chasing. The chasing part was done a bit prematurely, and Damien snarled as said chasing Kindred managed to cut a bullet across his shoulder. Jacket and flesh tore, but nothing debilitating, and Damien snapped his hand and grabbed a fire escape railing. Jessy followed, catching his meaning without a word, and the two ran up the old, bent, rickety stairs of metal as the hail of bullets and pellets continued.

It was a tall building. Dirty windows, windowsills with peeling paint, and old brick stained by time surrounded the two Kindred as they scaled the wall. Some kine looked out the window, but remained oblivious to Damien and Jessy, as Damien's touch blanketed the metal stairs with Touch of Shadow. The shaking, the creaking, only a kine paying close attention would notice. Or a vampire.

The two Right Hands jumped the final ten feet up to the rooftop, but another Kindred waited for them. Damien recognized her, an up-and-coming woman named Jody, and she aimed both her pistols at Damien's head.

Jessy pushed him aside, full body tackle. Bang bang. Jessy's scream announced she'd been shot. Damien crashed to the rooftop, rolled, and dove at Jody. She tried to right her aim, but as Damien closed the distance, he shot her, and the bullet landed in one of her thighs. Screaming, Jody took a step back as the pain hit her, and Damien closed the rest of the distance in moments. She didn't get the

chance to shoot again, Damien slicing his sword up and cutting off one hand. And as she fell back, he brought the sword down, and cut off her other hand.

Jody fell on her ass and stared at both her wrists as she screamed, but managed to bite it down halfway as she looked up at Damien.

He pointed his pistol at her, but he already knew he wouldn't shoot. And the fear in her eyes when he aimed at her sent a jolt of nausea through him.

“Shut up and don't move.” Sighing, Damien walked over to Jessy and crouched beside her. “Wounded?”

“Yeah. Bitch got me twice in the chest.” Jessy stood up and rubbed her chest, exposing the bullet wounds. They didn't penetrate far, probably an inch. A bulletproof vest would have worked better than her own flesh, but Gangrels hated trying to move in one. 9mm bullets weren't the most effective against Kindred capable of hardening their bodies anyway, such as Ventrue and Gangrels. It made logical sense that she push him out of the way and take the bullet for him.

But he also knew that thought hadn't crossed her mind at all when she pushed him out of the way. She did it because it wouldn't even occur to her to do otherwise, like it would Damien.

Sighing, Damien helped her to her feet. “Thank you.”

“Oh shut up, come on.” She pushed him off, but she teetered a little as she did.

Damien frowned, but there'd be no point in helping her. He knew that about her as well.

He broke into a run, and she followed. Cloaked, the two ran together, jumping across rooftops as they made their way through Carthian territory. They still had more ruckus to make.

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~~Jack~~

He sat in the big empty room, and waited. A damn big room too, the basement of an abandoned library near the edge of South and North Side. There were people nearby, other buildings that had people in them, apartments and casinos. But the old library had a deep, deep basement. Apparently it'd

been a storage facility for shit before becoming a library a hundred years ago, only to die when the internet swooped in and took over.

A lot of libraries adapted, became internet and information centers in other ways. Not in Dolareido. It was a surprise a library ever got off the ground at all. There was a bigger one in South Side, at a university, but you could barely call it a library anymore. An information hub, all computers and tablets, nothing more.

This library was the love project of someone who loved books, and no good deed goes unpunished. Alas, the tragic case of Dolareido. Antoinette would have found it poetic.

Jack looked around at the empty, dingy old room, the concrete walls, floor, dirty wood beams, and steel support pillars. And he grinned as Garry kicked in the door, literally. Old building, wooden door. It was bound to happen.

“Jack,” Garry said, and he stomped his way into the room. “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

Jack shrugged, threw his feet up onto the desk he sat behind, the only desk in the big empty room, and smirked at the Gangrel.

“Garry Tones. How nice of you to drop by.”