~~Jack~~

He took a deep, useless breath, then another, and another, before pressing the elevator button. Up to the top floor. Up to Antoinette.

He stepped off the elevator and stared at the big door that opened to Antoinette’s enormous main office. What to say? How to come at the conversation? What angle, what trick, what stance? He’d walked through a thousand different possibilities in his head, a thousand different ways the conversation might go, and he knew he wasn’t a tenth as prepared for it as Antoinette was. She’d probably had this exact conversation with people before, or something like it at least; she’d had millions with how old she was.

So, what the fuck was he gonna do? Hell, he didn’t actually disagree with her, and he hated himself for that. And it wasn’t like they knew what was going on. Azamel was convinced the tears Black Blood was creating were dangerous, for everyone. Ok, fine. Now Natasha said a spirit was convinced Black Blood was trying to do what Minerva was up to, and that might potentially be apocalyptic. Ok, fine. Jacob and Minerva were lovers, very close, and there was no way Jacob didn’t have at least some interest in what Minerva used to be up to when she was alive. Ok, fine.

Fuck. Fuck! He couldn’t trust Jacob, but he couldn’t quite come to the conclusion the dude was out to kill everyone. The bastard was strange, maybe a little psycho, but Triss wasn’t, and Triss had grown pretty devoted to the guy. And if Triss thought his mom was in danger, she’d do something.

Of course, Triss was getting neck deep into dark magic shit, and considering what she was up to, it was only a matter of time before his mom get involved. And that idea was almost as terrifying as Black Blood’s tears dooming the city. If something happened, something involving Mary, and it turned into a fucking horror movie, what would his mom do? She couldn’t even watch previews for horror movies without getting scared.

Jack slapped himself in the face. Focus. This isn’t about your mom. This isn’t about Black Blood or Jacob. Right now, this is about a stupid turf war between two stupid elders who don’t know how to let go of a grudge. He had to get this situation fixed now.

He knocked on the office door. It opened, revealing the sheriff, who gave Jack a small nod before he backed off and joined Antoinette by the desk.

And there she sat, face neutral, hands on the arms of her chair, sitting straight up. Power pose. She probably thought he was here to argue about his mom. Well—

“How was Clara’s visit?”

Oh fuck. Oh shit fuck. The shock on his face — he knew it was there — sealed the truth before he could say a fucking word. Fuck fucking fuck.

“You were spying on me?” When in doubt, deflect.

“I spy on everyone, Jack. This is my city.”

He sighed as he looked at her. If she was angry or offended, she didn’t let it show, but considering what they were talking about, there was a good chance she was angry. Livid, maybe. Tear his throat out, just possibly.

“You don’t trust me?”

“One of my thralls spotted you with a drone, Jack, and decided the footage warranted sending me.”

A drone. Well, the future was now, he had to be conscious of that. Maybe Scully or Mulder could drop some rocks on them?

“Alright. But I’m not here to talk about Clara, and I’d prefer to move on.”

Antoinette’s steel eyes were impervious. “Yes, perhaps that is for the best. For now.”

He did his best to hold her gaze. He managed, barely.

“I need your help.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I need to break our no business rule.”

“I will not help the Invictus win this war, Jack, you know that.” At least she was calling him Jack, and not Mister Terry.

“I know. This isn’t about winning it, this is about ending it. I’m trying to do you a favor.” And himself. Last thing he wanted was a bunch of dead people. Last thing he wanted was to be the one killing them. Last thing he wanted was the Ripper getting another foothold in his mind.

“Ending it? I am powerful, Jack. My sheriff is powerful. But I have used diplomacy to rule this city, not an iron fist.”

“You say that like you don’t have the ability to wipe out both Invictus and Carthians.”

She grinned, sly and smooth. “Perhaps.”

She was too smart to not have a bunch of shit set up for all out war if she absolutely needed it. Thralls, enslaved with either the Vinculum or her Majesty, trained and ready to die for her. Hidden explosives. Secrets she knew about people. Hell, it wouldn’t surprise him if she had a nearby military base under her control, and if shit hit the fan, she could launch anything from a coordinated military raid, to a fucking missile strike.

But those were all end game options. If she used them, her vampire utopia would be ruined, the streets turned into rubble, with open war waged in the open. She’d have to start over.

“I need to get Michael and Garry in a room together.”

“Now that the two have declared open hostilities, they have refused to join my Primogen meetings until such hostilities have ended.”

“Not there. I need them together somewhere where it’s a lot more… where they can tear into each other.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Ah. You wish to recreate the scenario between Tony and Viktor.”

“Yeah.”

“That scenario took months of effort to craft, Jack. Years. I did not simply throw pieces of bait into the city, and watch the two men run headlong into danger.”

“I understand that, but this time you’ll have better bait.” He walked up to her huge desk and set his hands on it. Negotiator mode. “Roland.”

“Michael’s dead childe.”

“Michael blames Garry. Garry blames Michael.”

“That was a hundred years ago.”

He shrugged. “So? You telling me vamps don’t hold grudges? If anything, Kindred suck at dropping grudges. We’re all stuck.”

“That is… not entirely untrue, though Kindred can evolve their minds. It is difficult, and takes effort, but we are capable. You are partially correct. Kindred do struggle to move on, trapped in our unchanging biology.”

“Exactly. I think Roland is a big part of why Michael and Garry hate each other.”

The Prince slowly nodded as she looked up. “Yes, I have always suspected as much. But you can confirm?”

“Maria told me. Details about Roland are uh… a little more personal than I expected. His death wasn’t the sort of thing anyone would just forget. In another city, I’m sure Michael would have killed Garry for it. But not in Dolareido. And Michael’s been resenting Garry ever since… and probably you, for how Dolareido is run, that he can’t just go kill Garry without upsetting you.”

Kindred on Kindred violence hadn’t exactly been outlawed, but the Prince had made it pretty damn clear it was discouraged. Killing an important Kindred would be a recipe for disaster. That sort of shit had led to the purge of the Lancea et Sanctum.

“You believe I should exploit the emotional attachment those two men had to Roland, and lure them into a confrontation, with their fury as the guiding beacon?”

“Yeah. Get them angry. Get them very angry. Get them so angry they can’t think straight, and barking like rabid animals.”

“Doable. They are Gangrels, after all.”

“Exactly. You get them livid and furious with each other, and trick them into doing something dumb. Maybe drop a hint about a cheap shot they could take to hurt the other, something they’d know would be taken personally by the other, something they couldn’t pass up on.”

“That, I believe, I can do.” Antoinette’s grin grew. “A devious plot. Well done.”

“Yeah well, I’ve run out of ideas on how to fix this. Azamel suggested this, not my idea.”

Apparently Antoinette wasn’t convinced, judging from the grin.

“I am sure.”

“Whatever. You going to help me or not?”

The grin vanished. “Jack, do not be curt with me. I am the one with grounds to be upset.”

“What, because of Clara? I said we can talk about it later.”

“I wish to speak of it now. You knew very well Clara is romantically interested in you, and yet you invited her into your apartment.”

“Excuse me for wanting to talk to a friend! Christ Antoinette, I ripped off her fucking arm. The whole damn city is terrified of me, and I thought for sure she would be too, but she isn’t. I just wanted to talk to her.”

“And is that all you did?”

“That… She kissed me, ok? She kissed me, but I stopped it.” Eventually. “And I explained that nothing was going to happen between us. I’m fucking pissed at you, but I’m not a moron. And I’m not unfaithful, you know. How can you even—”

“I spoke to Clara.”

Jack took a step closer until his knees almost touched her desk. “You fucking what?”

Daniel took a step forward as well, and Jack slowly turned his head to glare at the man. But before they could say anything, the Prince held up a hand.

“Daniel, please leave us.” She didn’t look her sheriff’s way, keeping her hard gaze locked on Jack.

“You sure?”

“Oui, I am sure.”

With a stone cold gaze, Daniel adjusted his glasses with a single finger against the bridge, nodded, and left. One glance over the shoulder before he opened the door, and closed it behind him.

“I said, I spoke to Clara.” Antoinette met his gaze again, though he didn’t see anger there. Frustration, sadness, subtle in her practiced stare, but not anger. “And I admit that, perhaps in the heat of my rage, I thought you had betrayed me. But it was a fleeting thing, and I quickly realized that nothing would happen between you two. I trust you.”

“I… thank you. But, then if you went to see her anyway, you… Oh fuck, did you kill her!?”

“Non.”

“Hurt her?”

“Non.” The fact she didn’t react to the absurdity of any of these things struck him cold. God damn.

“Then… what did you speak about?”

“Her relationship with you. Her inability to see how doomed it would be, regardless of whether I was a factor.”

“I… That…” He didn’t disagree. Strange as Antoinette and Jack were together, and as different as they were, they also had a lot in common. A lot of shared interests. A lot of shared passions. He woke up excited to talk to Antoinette about stuff.

He knew damn well he’d have basically nothing to talk to Clara about. They liked each other a lot, and were attracted to each other, but it took more than that to have a lasting relationship.

“And Clara understands that,” she continued. “It was a painful conversation for her, but she understands that. Harcourt is a better match for her, but—”

“He doesn’t really know how to, uh, be a ‘man’ about it.” He air-quoted ‘man’.

She grinned. “Oh? You spoke with Clara about Harcourt?”

“Yeah. Before she… yeah. I talked to Harcourt yesterday too, after that, and I think I gave him a decent nudge in her direction.”

“Oh Jack, please tell me you were discrete?”

“Um.” He scratched his buzzed head as he thought about it. “… no, definitely not.”

Sighing, Antoinette rolled her eyes and stood up. She motioned for him to follow as she stepped over to the giant window behind her chair.

“You made a mistake, inviting Clara into you apartment. I understand you were trying to salvage your friendship, but you put her into a dangerous and painful position.”

He groaned as he joined her in front of the window. “Maybe.”

“But I made a mistake as well. The thought of her touching you, had me ready to murder her. I made a terrible assumption, and went to her quite willing to end her.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I did not, and while I like to believe I never would have, it was when I saw her… her expression, as she returned to her den, that I realized I was being foolish.”

Her expression?

“You know I’d never cheat on you, Antoinette. I mean, yeah I’m angry at you, at the situation, but it’d take more than this to end the relationship, right? And even if I’d decided to end it, I wouldn’t touch any girl until we’d talked, right? I mean come on, this is me. The one thing, the one damn thing I got going for me, is I stick to my guns.” Sticking to his guns was a nice way to put it, an ego-stroking way. Truth was, he pretty much couldn’t break his word. It didn’t compute, didn’t resolve in his brain.

“I know.”

“And, I was telling Arturo and Matthew this, but… there needs to be room in a relationship to be angry at each other. Problems happen. Mistakes happen, right? I mean, I know I’m preaching to the choir here, but—”

“I have forgotten more about the nature of human interaction than others will ever know, my love. But I became an observer of such things centuries ago, not a true participant.”

“I guess. I… I’m just trying to say, we can get into arguments about stuff, and not worry about the relationship disappearing. Even about serious stuff like… like what to do about Mom. We need to be able to trust each other.” Talking about relationships was hard, and awkward, and painful. And it sounded dumb saying shit like that, but they needed to be said, because they were true.

“I trust you, my love. I do not trust others. They will manipulate you, lie to you, deceive you, or take advantage of your honesty. Our relationship is precious to me in a way a child like Clara will never understand.”

He looked up at her, but she kept her gaze on the window, and her city, even as her expression softened into something pained and sad. To her, their relationship was more than a romantic one, it was something she was sure no elder her age could ever have. Combined with her Daeva tendencies, Antoinette was possessive. Smart enough to realize it, but still a slave to it.

It was a weird relationship, and he wouldn’t trade it for the world.

He turned, faced her, and gave her a small shove. Tall as she was, a foot taller than him, reaching her shoulders required reaching up a bit, but he managed.

She stumbled a little, something he didn’t think he’d ever seen her do before.

“I beg your pardon?”

He smiled up at her, and gave her another shove. Apparently being shoved by him was something so unexpected, she couldn’t imagine it ever happening twice, because she stumbled back again.

“Jack! You—”

“Antoinette. I know you think you need to be the ancient vampire in everything, all the time, even when you’re with me. But you know I know you’re still a person, right? Not a god or statue or something.”

“What are you—”

“I’m saying… relax.”

She blinked down at him. “You are telling me, to relax? You? The boy with the weight of the world on his shoulders?” She said that last part sarcastically.

He shrugged. “You’re right you’re right. What I’m trying to say is, when it comes to… to us, to you and me? We’re solid, ok? Like… like…” He blinked at her, then down at the floor. “Like, you… you know I want to spend the rest of my life with you, right? That includes the arguments and butting heads. I mean, fuck, I was getting worried that we never butt heads! It was too good, too perfect, too surreal. We should argue sometimes. Arguing is real.”

Score one for Jack, he’d managed to surprise the five-hundred-year-old Daeva.

“You wish to argue more?”

“I want a relationship where we can feel comfortable arguing. Little things, serious things. I want you to be comfortable knowing I’m not going to abandon this relationship just because we aren’t perfectly in agreement about everything all the time.” He looked down and squirmed a little. “I’d ask you to marry me, you know? If it made sense for us. If…”

“If I was not Prince. If I was not of the Ordo Dracul.” With a heavy, but happy sigh, Antoinette spun her chair around to face the window, and sat. “But, please understand the sentiment is received, my love. There is little I would not do for you. For us. And with my childe, it… it is a decision I made not only because I felt it necessary, but also because, despite the strain I knew it would put on our relationship, I knew… felt, it would survive it.”

He laughed as he walked up to her, and took her hands into his. At least with her sitting, he was taller than her.

“But a visit from Clara and you freak out?”

“I did not freak out. Ancient vampires such as myself are beyond freaking out. We… enact our will.”

“Uh huh.” He kissed her hand, and came in closer, until his knees were touching hers. “I… I mean, I’m still angry about the situation with Mom. But I don’t really disagree with you about what you’re doing either. I guess maybe I’m angry at myself for not being…”

“Cruel enough, to potentially sacrifice your mother to save others? Come now Jack, no one should be forced to make such a decision. It was part of the reason I did not ask you. I knew it needed to be done, and if I laid the decision at your feet, you would tear yourself apart making it.”

He groaned as he nodded. “You’re too damn smart.”

“That I am.”

“Humble too.”

“Of course. Though I am no Ventrue.”

And back to laughing. “Clara thinks all this tactical, cold reasoning doesn’t hold up when the bullets start flying. That it’s will and love for your… fellow soldiers I guess, that really save the day.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I mean, kinda? I guess I only believe that, when it’s about the heat of the moment.”

“As you said, when the bullets fly.”

“Yeah. I think if I wanted a military general making macro decisions, I’d want you.”

“You would do well in such a position, Jack.”

“Maybe.” And probably hate himself every day of it. He sighed, and as he leaned in, she leaned in too. With him still standing, he set his forehead down against hers, and they held each other’s hands in a ball on her knees together. “I won’t tell Mom.”

“Thank you.”

“Clara won’t either.”

“That is good.” She tilted her head upward, and kissed him.

He kissed her back. “I uh, wanted to talk about Michael and Garry. Things are getting pretty bad. The fighting’s getting worse. That whole thing with sparing Tilly, I’d hoped it’d calm him down and get him to back off, but…”

“He is angry, Jack. Angry to the core of his being. And perhaps, no longer reasonable.”

“I know that feeling.”

“Do not we all.” She grinned and kissed him again. “I will do what I can. With emotions as the bait, perhaps I will be able to have the two dogs chasing it easily enough. I will need… two weeks. Do you believe you can keep their turf war managed until then?”

“Two weeks? Maybe. Amanda, she…”

“What? A secret?”

“Kinda, yeah. It’s Invictus business, but… I know Amanda’s still alive. Michael staked her. Has her stored somewhere.”

Antoinette pulled back a couple inches. “Michael has tricked Garry. He has tricked me.”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“I should—”

“If you do, Michael will know I told you. This is an Invictus thing, and I shouldn’t have told you.”

“But you did.”

“Because something’s going on,” he said. “Michael didn’t stake her against her will. If that’d been the case, he might have just killed her outright. But Michael isn’t that colossal an asshole.” She raised a brow, unconvinced, but he set his hands on her shoulders. “He isn’t. The thing that concerns me, is it seems like he didn’t take Amanda against her will.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I don’t know enough details, but I do know she let him stake her. Maybe Michael’s blackmailing her, maybe not. But there’s something weird going on. The timing of this turf war is just too perfect.”

She nodded. “Indeed it is. I constantly find my attention diverted by it. I am… researching avenues to deal with Black Blood, options, but my thralls bombard me not with information of the spirit, but of Garry and Michael and their infuriating skirmishes. If they violate the Masquerade, I will need to squelch the issue, and I have been forever preparing to deal with those two if such a problem arises. It will get violent.”

“I’ll do what I can. But if we don’t get this issue between them resolved, they’ll keep pushing until someone dies or crosses the line.”

She nodded as she leaned back in her chair, but she didn’t let go of his hands either. “We will fix this. And then we will deal with Black Blood, you and I.”

“Ha. Partners?”

“Indeed.” Nodding again, she pulled him in to her, and before he knew it, she’d turned him around and set him on her lap. “I missed you last night, my love.”

“Because of—”

“You were not with me, and I admit that the troubles that befall my city have left me frustrated and stressed.”

Frustrated and stressed was what Antoinette used to describe Jack, as a precursor to sex. After those words, he’d usually wind up sitting or lying down, and Antoinette would be treating him to some sexual de-stressing.

Message received. He laughed, and turned on her lap. Yeah, she was a foot taller than him, a lean-but-curvy goddess, and he fit pretty damn comfortably on her lap. He nuzzled his head into the groove of her shoulder and neck, undid one of her jacket buttons, and another.

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~~Eric~~

He stared across the river, into the city of concrete and fake light. Behind him was the forest, chirping with crickets and caressing his fur with a breeze smelling of bark and grass and moss.

“I’m dreaming.” Easy enough to tell that. He was in his wolf body, sitting on his haunches, and was able to talk without actually moving his mouth.

“Yes, you are,” the shining light above said. Above and below, the moon’s reflection shimmering in the river.

“Haven’t talked to you in a while.”

“I have been busy, young Uratha.”

“Busy?”

“Do not ask. I am not allowed to speak of it.”

Not allowed to speak of it? What sort of things could a moon goddess not talk about?

“Alright.”

“You are soon to work with Avery to investigate the tears in Dolareido.”

“I am.”

“How do you plan to deal with the blood wraiths that guard the tears?”

He shrugged, as much as a wolf could shrug. “You don’t know? Seems you’ve been eavesdropping.”

“I… am not omniscient.”

“Big of you to admit that.”

“My reach is far, and my power vast, Uratha. Or did you think I had not touched this city?”

“Touched the city?”

“Surely you have enjoyed its sexual indulgences.”

“You—oh. Us being in better control of our Gauru form. Kinda thought one of the big sex spirits in the city was responsible for that.”

The moon shimmered a little more. “I would be lying if I said I did not consult with them. The choir of sexual spirits in Dolareido are powerful.”

“A moon spirit colluding with sex spirits to… what, let Uratha fuck more?”

“I need not explain myself to you. But I am happy to know you have been indulging my gift.”

He laughed. “Jessy has been, anyway.”

“Surely you have as well. The power, the desire, holding her naked body and forcing your immense length into her insides, to—”

“Not going to talk about my sex life with some spirit god that gave me a curse I didn’t ask for.”

“Curse?”

“Being a werewolf.”

“I gave you a gift.”

“Uh huh. You knowing I fucking ate someone my first night transformed?”

“I do.”

“You think I wanted that?”

“How is your knee, young Uratha?”

He growled as he paced the river shore. “I suppose you think you can do whatever you want. Us humans are just pawns for you fuckers to play with.”

“I think you do not understand the game if you think you are but a piece on a chess board.” The moon sighed, somehow. “Regardless. How are you, Eric?”

“I… I’m fine.”

“Do not lie.”

“Alright, better than fine. I’m great. My knee’s healed. I’m in the best shape of my life. I got an amazing girlfriend. I make great money. Dad’s out of the hospital and happily retired.” And probably looking at pictures of his girlfriend’s tits. “But I’m also neck deep in life or death shit.”

“You were always in danger, Eric. Now you can actually do something about it.”

“I still don’t know why me. It’s not like I’m—”

“No, it’s not like you are special. But Dolareido has been at the center of rising events for a while now. Others like me are here, and we’re invested in the outcome.”

“You mean the tears? And Black Blood?”

Silence.

“Luna, if you know about what’s going on, you have to tell me.”

“I am bound by the rules, as are the others.”

“Others?”

“Continue as you are, and you will learn more, I am sure.”

He grumbled and groaned and shook his head. “Why are you here, visiting my dream then, if I’m not important?”

“You represent my presence in this city.”

“Do I?”

“You do. Be thankful. It is why I speak to you. I wish to grow my presence in these walls.”

“Why?”

Silence, for a moment. But after a few seconds, the breeze in the forest grew to a hard wind, the river rippled under its power, and the distant city went quiet.

Rustling in the bushes. Eric turned around, and froze. A white wolf. The larger wolf crept out from the woods, deep eyes shining with stars of their own as she approached.

It didn’t feel like a dream anymore. It felt very real.

“Things are happening in this city, so I touched it with my hand. Enjoy the gifts I have given you,” the big scary white wolf said.

“But…. what?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“Then why tell me anything?”

“Because I am happy to see the fruits of my labor have helped someone.” She came closer before she walked past him, and sat by the river beside him. Close. He was so close to her. And dream or not, he could feel the power radiating from her, like standing in the eye of a hurricane. “Maybe things will be different in this city in the future. Maybe my children will find a little happiness, instead of this endless march to fulfill their father’s duty.”

“Father?”

“Father Wolf.”

Father Wolf, a mythic figure he knew next to nothing about. Except, what Avery had told him, about how his children killed him, and doomed the world to this weird split between physical and material. Sounded like a load of shit to Eric, but a moon goddess was sitting next to him. You could only take denial so far.

“I… see.”

“I miss him, you know.” The white wolf shook her head and patted the water once with a paw. “And perhaps I made a mistake in my anger. My children have… fought hard, carrying his burden, even the stubborn ones like you.”

“I’ve done his duty?”

“Are you not doing what you can to keep the spirits in Dolareido under control? Sneaking away into the Hisil to kill those you consider problematic?”

“I… I was just helping out my city.”

“And that is why I chose you. Not because you are special, but because you consider this city yours, and it is this city that I consider special.” Sighing again, she lowered herself until she lay on the river shore. “Maybe my children will find a little respite here.”

“Are you, uh, giving the Uratha a break? Like, fifteen-minute break from work, in Dolareido? Cause this is just one city, and it’s not like I’ve been doing this Uratha gig long.”

“Perhaps with time, things will be different. Be happy that I am testing what can be done here and now, as my temper has… waned.”

“Temper? How long ago did Father Wolf die?”

“Tens of thousands of years. A blink of the eye in the lifespan of Gaia.”

That was true. If the Luna spirit really was a spirit form of the moon, however that worked, yeah she’d been around for hundreds of millions of years. And the idea that he was sitting next to her was too damn big to wrap his mind around.

“What… What is Dolareido to you, Luna? What’s so special about it?”

“I cannot tell you. But I am sure you will find more on your own.”

“But—”

“No more questions. I am not here to indulge your curiosity. I am here to see how you are doing, how you are enjoying my gifts, and to… settle my guilt, I suppose.”

“Guilt?”

“It is my will that Uratha are to bound to Urfarah’s duty, these… Forsaken children of ours. Perhaps they will not be so forlorn… within Dolareido’s walls.”

At this point, he gave up asking. Either she didn’t answer, or her answers were beyond him.

But she’d made one thing obvious: she felt bad. Guilty about something she’d done thousands of years ago. Sad her, uh, lover was dead. Maybe lonely? The fuck did he know about spirits that were basically gods?

“Mason,” he said, “he told me about what happened to him, when he first transformed. Killed and ate a bunch of idiot punks. Then he spent months just wandering around, life ruined. Everything was hard for him. Avery found him, and life got better. But he tells me Dolareido’s the best place he’s stayed, the only place he’s lived in that, as an Uratha, he feels like he can be who he is.”

Luna lifted her head, looked at him, nodded in a gesture his wolf brain recognized as a wolf’s equivalent of a smile, and set her head back down on the river’s edge.

“This city is a respite for more than just Uratha. I hope it stays that way. I hope you all survive.”

Well, that was certainly foreboding, and he really wasn’t up for more foreboding. Things had been foreboding for far too long, but he knew Luna wouldn’t answer his question. She wasn’t here for him. She was here for herself, and he was just the closest ear she had.

Who else like her was in Dolareido? As much as someone like her could be ‘in’ a city. Black Blood? Did they exist on the same level? So many questions, and she was going to leave him in the dark about all of it. And honestly he’d prefer to not know about any of it. Just let him keep doing what he was doing. Don’t tease him with information about gods playing games.

Was that so bad? Just let a man enjoy his new werewolf life. Sure it had some shitty parts, and he constantly found himself driven by some sort of instinct, demanding he hunt spirits and look for weird balance problems between the Hisil and Gurihal. But the health, the power, the sex drive, it was all amazing. He was happier than he’d ever been. And now she was hinting that it might all go up in flames.

But there wasn’t any point in bitching about it. So, after looking down at the literal god paying his dream a visit, he did the only thing he could do. He lay down beside her, and watched the reflection of the moon in the river, and the reflection of the city lights across the way.

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~~Damien~~

One week later.

Somehow, no one had died yet. It’d gotten close. Jack had been involved in three skirmishes, and had caused serious injury to half a dozen Kindred. Damien had been in one, and had been shot several times. Jessy had been in half a dozen, and had beaten up and been beaten up as many times.

Two buildings had been burned down. Thankfully they were office buildings in North Side. One had been abandoned after the industrial boom, but another hadn’t; empty at the time, thank the Lord. The Masquerade was still intact, but burning buildings made the Prince angry. She made that anger felt when she sent the sheriff knocking on their doors. He didn’t give an order, barely said a word, but both the Invictus and Carthians got the message: damage to the city was frowned upon.

But Damien doubted Garry or Michael would listen. Maria would. She cared about the city, and the potential to slowly revive the Lancea et Sanctum within it. Michael and Garry did not. Like Jack said, they were dogs, barking at each other over a fence. But unlike most dogs, they were willing to fight and fight hard the moment someone gave them a nudge.

Damien peered through his telescope. He’d moved it to a better position, where he could watch the main street that crossed much of the city. A straight road, peering down its length allowed him to see all the way to the Carthian district. If anything strange happened, he might catch it before it showed up on the news. Might even catch some Carthian activity, and stop a fight.

But he wasn’t looking down the streets to watch the Carthians at the moment. Right now, he was adjusting the focus and pointing it at nearby buildings, the tall buildings of the South Side entertainment district, and their enormous windows.

He stepped back, and Fiona stepped in.

“I can see!”

“Remember how to change the focus?”

“Aye! Aye I got it. I… wow. Ye can see everything!”

Nodding, he sat down on the rooftop’s raised edge, and looked down below. They were on one of the apartment buildings, shorter than the others, cause it meant the telescope could get a better angle seeing directly into the windows of other buildings. Peeping, obviously, but in Dolareido, people wanted to be peeped on. The windows were massive for more than sight seeing, but also being the sight.

Fiona burst into giggles a second later. She found one.

“Ah, gross! There’s an old couple fucking on a sex swing!”

Try as he might, Damien couldn’t help but laugh as well. “There’s a lot of exhibitionists and whatnot in Dolareido, and they’re not limited by age.”

She groaned and pretended to vomit, but she was smiling. “I suppose it’s cute. The power of viagra!”

“Probably.”

She turned the telescope a bit. “This couple is… two lads with little miniatures on a… big table that looks like a… battlefield?”

“You thought every window was going to be a perfect porn display, didn’t you?”

“The first one was! If I was eighty!”

Damien rolled his eyes, got behind his girlfriend, and gently nudged the telescope to point toward Jessy’s building. “Sixteenth floor, corner room. Jessy’s room.” Fiona moved her head a second and he doubled checked. “Yeap, that’s it.”

“Ye know where her apartment is?”

“Through no fault of my own, I promise. But I examine the city regularly, and Jessy had a habit of having sex in front of her window with her four ghouls. An orgy, against a giant window, is kinda hard to miss.”

“Ah bugger, blinds are closed now.”

“If you wanted to watch her have sex, just ask. She’ll give you a video or stream it or something.”

She laughed as she stood up and grinned at him. “Ye dinnae mind?”

“Born and raised in a city of sin, and then fifty years hiding in its sewers and tunnels. Pretty desensitized to public sex.”

“Aye, but I mean, most lads can get pretty prissy about their girls seeing other lads fucking.”

“I guess.” He shrugged, and gestured to the telescope. “The Lancea et Sanctum teach humility.”

“Ha. Are ye humble?”

“It wouldn’t be very humble of me to say I am humble.”

“But ye said the… the…” Laughing again, she looked back into the telescope, and scanned nearby buildings. “Ooh, I see something good! Pretty lad, pretty lass.” She paused for a moment before she squealed and giggled. “He’s fucking her ass!”

Well, he couldn’t resist an invite like that. Promptly, he gave Fiona a nice slap on the ass. She jumped up with a squeak, turned around, punched him in the shoulder, blushed, and looked back through the telescope to hunt for more exhibitionists.

“You said you didn’t like anal,” he said. He hadn’t ever prompted her for anal, never asked, but they had talked about the things they liked. Damien barely knew what he liked, but Vrall knew a lot, and Fiona had experimented a heck of a lot in her short life. All behind closed doors with toys, but she knew.

“Aye, but that does nae mean I dinnae want to see some other lass get manhandled and fucked in the butt.” She motioned for Damien to come in, and he did.

In the window was what she said, a human fucking another human. The woman was on her knees, and the man was fucking her from behind; the angle made the anal penetration obvious. The brunette with the fake breasts looked out the window, and the pleasure on her face was blatant as she realized people were looking at her. She couldn’t see Damien or Fiona, far as they were, but there were dozens of nearby buildings that’d be able to see into the huge window.

“See?” Fiona said, giggling louder as she nudged him out of the way and took the telescope back. “It does nae need to be for me, to look hot.”

He decided to not ask about her porn habits. In the modern world, there was plenty of porn for ladies, free porn for anyone with an internet connection, and he was sure Fiona had explored it quite a bit. Dolareido’s sex-obsessed aesthetic didn’t surprise her much when she arrived.

She moved the telescope again, and giggled as she found someone else to spy on. “Did ye fight any Carthians yet?”

“Yeah, just yesterday. Maria wants me to try and get back the territory Garry took over after she was injured. I did a little inspecting, and got into a fight.”

She gasped as she turned around, and grabbed his hand. “Ye dinnae tell me!?”

“I was fine. I shot them a few times, but nothing serious.”

Gasp turned into angry frown, and she poked him in the chest. “Ye should still tell me. I’m yer girlfriend, and I… I get worried about ye. Azamel says we should still stay out of the fight, but… but ye’re in the fight!”

He reached out, and pulled her into a hug. She struggled a bit, not happy, but a good squeeze soon had her relenting and hugging him back.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Ye better.”

“And if you think there’s something you can do to help Jack, by all means, tell him. This isn’t Invictus versus the Carthians. It’s Jack, trying to save both.”

“Aye I know. But Azamel still wants to stay out of it anyway.”

Damien wasn’t entirely sure about that. According to Jack, she’d changed headspace, and was now trying to leave Dolareido a better place for her family before she died. Commendable, but ‘better’ probably didn’t include vampires as a focus.

He kissed Fiona. She kissed him back. They nuzzled into each other, and he breathed in the smell of her as he slid his hands down her back. Once his fingers got to her jeans, filled by her large ass, he squeezed the softness and earned a small giggle and mewl from her. He—

His phone rang, and he knew the ring. Jack’s ring. Lord, do you not have mercy for this poor soul who desperately wants to spend time with his girlfriend?

Fiona sighed and stepped back. “I know I know.” Nodding, she grinned playfully, and set her eye to the telescope again.

Damien rolled his eyes, and answered. “Hey Jack.”

“Damien. Whatcha doing?”

“Hanging out with Fiona and my telescope.”

“Let me guess. She’s spying on people.”

He chuckled. “It’s a large city, with large windows.”

“Part of me thinks Antoinette made sure the city was shaped this way, specifically so people would get eyefuls of everything.”

A reasonable theory. Dolareido had millions of people living in it, but it wasn’t nearly as spread out and sporadic as some cities, like Los Angeles. It was more like Hong Kong, cramped, but with the Las Vegas sexual flair. You couldn’t walk anywhere without seeing every carnal sin.

Lucas hated that. To him, kine indulging in sexual pleasure was an insult to God’s purity. Now, Damien disagreed, but a part of him could understand why a hyper conservative, volatile, angry man like Lucas would find Dolareido and the Prince’s way of things so offensive. A small part.

“Need something, Jack?”

“Yeah. I know this is your day off, but—”

“We get days off?”

Jack laughed. “Good point. Can you get up here? North Side, Tanvar building.”

“Your detail?”

“Yeah. Mulder and Scully are reporting some activity. I need some eyes that can get closer.”

Damien closed his mouth and looked to Fiona. She glared at him. “I… I’ll be there.”

“Thanks. Tell Fiona please don’t hate me.”

“She won’t hate you.” He offered Fiona a small smile, but all he got was glares. “She will be angry though.”

“Welp, can’t help that. Thanks.”

“No problem.” He hung up, and winced as he tried to smile some more for Fiona. “I have to go.”

“We’re on a date!”

“Jack thinks the Carthians are going to attack the Tanvar building again.”

“Get Jessy to—”

“She’s busy patrolling the border. There’s been more skirmishes there lately, more brawls. A couple Invictus nearly died.”

Frown only growing, Fiona marched up to him and put her hands on her hips. With her short stature and wide hips, it was a delightful image, and he couldn’t help but smile before putting a kiss on her forehead.

“I promise I’ll be safe. Jack just wants me to do some recon.”

“Ye just said some other Invictus nearly died!”

“I’m not Invictus.”

“Close enough!”

“Maria works with the Invictus, and I have the Right Hand title, but it’s not… I take orders from Maria, not Michael.”

“And Jack?”

“It wasn’t an order. It was a request from a friend.”

“Nu uh! Ye know Maria would ask ye to do it, too.”

He slipped his arms around her and hugged her. “Fiona, come on, you know we’re doing everything we can to end this fight as soon as we can. What about you? Azamel still got you investigating those tears?”

“… sometimes… from a distance!”

“That’s dangerous, too.”

“N-Nae it’s not! I stay good and far away.”

“We do dangerous things, Fiona. But I’ll do everything I can to make sure I don’t get hurt, ok?” Which was about as empty a promise as someone could make, almost as empty as when a soldier promised his wife he’d come home alive. The same soldier would sacrifice his life to save a comrade.

Damien was a little more selfish than a soldier, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try and help Jack if things got bad.

But, he also knew if things got really bad, he might just bail. Not because he was selfish; not by Kindred standards at least. But, the idea of breaking Fiona’s heart hurt. Really fucking hurt.

How did Julias do it?

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~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Jack~~

He popped his head over the counter, and fired five shots before slipping back into cover.

“Would you go away!”

“Fuck you!” Gunfire followed the shout, and Jack ducked lower as a chunk of the countertop went flying past his head.

It was only a matter of time before they came for the Tanvar building again. Last time, it’d been about making a statement. This time, maybe Garry wanted it for its actual territorial value. Apparently sparing Tilly’s life hadn’t done much to persuade him to go easy on the Invictus. Maybe he thought Jack was trying to trick him.

No, that couldn’t be true. After everything that’d happened between the two when they were fighting, he felt Garry finally understood Jack was trying to help everyone. Then maybe the fact no Kindred had died yet was because of that. Maybe Garry had been giving him time to get shit sorted.

Well either Garry thought he’d given Jack enough time, or Joe was taking initiative. Probably both.

Near him and by the broken front window sat Bruce again, a shotgun in hand. No Jessy. Instead he had Vivienne, Natasha’s childe. Poor girl was a vamp barely older than Jack. Supposedly defending this building was a good opportunity for Vivi to prove to the Invictus she was trustworthy, after that whole joining Lucas fiasco. The kid hadn’t joined Lucas on the kamikaze mission, none of the Invictus Lucas had managed to recruit had, but building trust in the Invictus was a damn hard thing to do, especially after breaking it.

He envied the Carthians that. They weren’t at each other’s throats. And much as the Invictus looked like a fully functioning, prim and proper society on the surface, they were always at each other’s throats, just silently. The Carthians were a family, a close gang, a bunch of stupid punks that were at least united in their stupidity.

It was easy to understand why the Invictus resorted to violence when dealing with Carthians. Only Viktor had actually tried to negotiate with them, and Jack was sure that was just a way to manipulate them. But Garry wasn’t as stupid as Viktor thought he was.

There were other Kindred with Jack, upstairs instead of down in the lobby with him. Zack, Manchester, Derick again, and the pair Vicky and Parker. They also had a half dozen thralls and a couple ghouls, all in different floors, and shooting out at targets across the street. Everyone had guns.

It was raining bullets in Dolareido that night. The cliché made him groan.

Across the street, the Carthians were shooting at them from the closest building. Windows were gone, glass was everywhere, and bullets littered the walls. It’d take weeks of work for a cleanup crew to find all the casings, if they even bothered. It was a shootout between rival gangs, as far as the media knew. Problem was, now that the media knew, they watched the police like hawks. Awkward activity meant Masquerade risks. That meant the Invictus couldn’t tell the cops to sit around doing nothing while guns were being fired.

That meant they were on a time limit.

“I’m giving you guys an out!” Jack yelled over the counter in the lobby. “Leave!”

“Fuck you!” Oh god it was Joe. Always with Joe. “Fuck you, fuck the Invictus! Fuck you all!”

Apparently, Joe had caused a few more brawls since Jack dealt with him a week ago. Say one thing for the moron, he was tenacious. Maybe he held it against Jack, for dealing with him last week. Maybe Joe had some long, serious problems with the Invictus, that left him filled with unending hatred for them. Or most likely, he was a moron, a stereotypical fucking idiot who looked at any sort of organized hierarchy as evil, and his idiot brain was overwhelmed with a need to burn it down. Stereotypical anarchist. Couldn’t see past his own nose.

Jack poked his head up again. Bodies ran across the street, getting closer. Some of them blurred into shadow. Others crouched low and used hand claws for grip on the asphalt. One of them jumped high, and scaled the wall, going up. Vampires. No thralls or ghouls, just vampires. Carthians used less thralls and ghouls than Invictus, but still, they usually had at least some.

If they brought nothing but vampires, that meant business. Shit. Fucking shit. No Garry though. Was it Joe, trying to make a statement? If Jack had to rip off the man’s arms to put the fucker out of commission for a few months, he would.

Jack put his pistol away, and pulled out his shotgun. “Fuck this. If things get hairy, get lethal.”

Bruce smiled and nodded, but Vivi blinked at him.

“You sure?” she asked. Poor kid. Older than him, but the look in her eyes told him one thing: kid.

“I’m sure. This is getting ridiculous. We’re the defenders here, and I’m not going to lose people because I’m trying to keep people from dying. If it’s us or them, it’s them. Got it?” Whatever Antoinette was doing to get Michael and Garry to boil over and be willing to be in the same room together, it wasn’t happening fast enough. Or this was a side effect.

Vivienne gulped, and grabbed her shotgun.

~Master!~ Scully’s thoughts. ~Incoming! Five Kindred coming to you! More going up!~

Kindred could take a lot of punishment. Even a fledgling could survive a bullet through the head, as long as the bullet didn’t rip open a giant hole on the way through. But a shotgun from close range did a lot more than a single hole. It’d rip a canyon through any Kindred that wasn’t focusing on keeping vitae protecting their bodies, and still seriously injure one who was.

“Stay down, only take a shot if I’m up and being a target,” Jack said. Bruce and Vivienne nodded.

Jack took off his necklace, stored it inside his pants’ pocket in a little bag that would supposedly resist fire and tearing, and he poured his vitae through his body. No need to bring the blood out to the surface, not yet. Going juggernaut was unbelievably draining, and he had to rely on the curse’s power exclusively to fuel the absurd ability. The more he relied on it, the more he relied on the curse, and the more chances he gave the curse to get out. He’d avoided letting the Ripper out, truly out, for weeks now, and he was going to keep avoiding him for as long as he could.

He poked his head up, spotted movement behind a car, and fired. Pellets shattered the window, ricocheted off the hood, and earned a grunt of pain from a vamp who quickly ducked back behind the car. No time to evaluate, Jack aimed to more movement, a Kindred running across the street, and fired. But the Carthian jumped, easily clearing twenty feet, and probably landed on a windowsill on the floor above Jack.

He didn’t want them to get closer. If they got too close, there was a good chance someone was going to die, and it wasn’t going to be him.

Vivienne and Bruce stood up and fired. Bruce made an effort to aim, and mostly succeeded, but Vivi was obviously more comfortable with knives and keyboards, not firearms. She struggled with the recoil, and growled down at the gun in frustration before resettling the butt of it against her shoulder.

She shouldn’t be here. Tash’s childe was a Mekhet, and sure, Mekhet could be amazing in battle, but Vivi wasn’t Tash or Damien. She was happier using words or computers to do her battles, not guns.

The whole situation was fucking garbage.

Jack ducked down, loaded a few more shells, and popped back up, only for some giant metal disc to smash into his chest. He flew back and crashed into the back wall, but with vitae enforcing his insides, the sewer cover hadn’t managed to break any of his ribs. And he’d managed to hold onto his gun. Live and learn.

By the time he got up, several bodies jumped in through the big lobby front window. But not a couple of neonates like last time. No, two ancilla jumped in, Steve and Bella again, and they smirked at him as they immediately turned to their sides, and jumped Bruce and Vivi. Vivi went down before she could get off a shot, but Bruce got his barrel up and put a shell into Bella’s arm, but only a graze.

Jack hopped up, and put a shell into Steve’s side as he tried to punch the girl. “Get the fuck off her!”

Steve roared as pellets ripped open his shirt and side. He jumped against the distant wall, landed feet first, jumped off it, and came at Jack down low. Fucking acrobatic Daeva asshole. Jack took two shots at him as the man flew through the air, missed both, but once Steve was only a foot from him, ready to dodge a third shot, Jack swung the gun like a bat into the side of the man’s head.

Steve flew to the side, half in a barrel roll before he struck against the wall of the office building’s lobby. With how hard his head had been jerked to the side, Jack had definitely done something to the inside of his neck, tearing muscle and maybe breaking something. He’d be down for a minute though, and Jack had other problems.

He aimed his shotgun at Bella, but she was in a melee brawl with Bruce, the two of them engaged in some cross between a fistfight and a wrestling match. God fucking damn it. Jack ran for them, and swung the gun’s but for Bella’s head.

He didn’t reach her. Metal shars slammed into his side, ripped up his suit, and sent him sprawling against a corner. Not a shotgun, but heavy caliber pistols, slugs heavy enough to throw his weight around easily.

“Fuuuuck.” He got up as quick as he could, but his shotgun was gone, ten feet away and under a desk. Before Jack could get it, three vampires jumped in through the window.

Joe, and two other Kindred, ancilla, Garner and Kass. All four ancilla were older than Joe, but were following his lead. Why? The fuck did this idiot do to get the most powerful Kindred Garry had, to follow his lead? Figure that out later. For now deal with the fuckers jumping in.

Jack got up again, but as he did, he grabbed the manhole cover they’d hit him with, and threw it at the closest vampire, Garner. They didn’t expect a kid barely over a hundred pounds to whip a hundred pound disc right back at them, and it crashed into Garner’s chest hard enough to send him back out the window he’d come in through. Fuckers didn’t understand. Just cause Jack wasn’t a Daeva or Nos didn’t mean he didn’t have strength, and the curse had plenty.

Bruce and Bella fell wrestled on the ground, roaring and punching and even clawing. They were similar age, and Jack trusted Bruce to hold his own, or at least not get killed while Jack dealt with these three. And then he had to deal with the other vamps on the roof and other floors; he could hear the gunfire and shouting.

“Get out,” Jack said.

Joe laughed, and pointed two pistols at him. “No.” The dumbass didn’t hesitate, and fired. Apparently Jack hadn’t been thorough enough teaching the man a lesson at the Border Bar.

Jack brought up his vitae, and hardened his skin, flesh, and bones. With the thick liquid pulsing under his skin, and with his necklace off, he had no issue limiting the damage bullets did, to almost nothing. How stupid was this man that he’d try the same thing again? How the fuck was this moron giving him—

Joe quickly slipped his pistols into the holsters on his holster vest, reached over a shoulder, and pulled out a shotgun. Oh fuck. Jack dashed forward, but Joe didn’t so much as blink as he lined up the shot and unloaded the spray of pellets into Jack’s face, from ten feet away.

Jack managed to get his hand up, but the metal pellets collided with it, and his right shoulder, and his chest. At least none hit his eyes, but the impact of a shotgun was too much, and Jack flew back again. His back hit the wall, and he slumped to the ground on his ass. Joe didn’t hesitate to shoot at Jack again, but Jack had enough time to get his arm up to stop the fucker from shooting him in the face. So Joe aimed for his chest and stomach, and Jack groaned as the tiny bits of metal shred through his jacket and shirt, and flattened against his hardened skin.

“Tanvar building is ours. I don’t know why the boss let you live last time he was here, but fuck that. Fuck that, fuck him, and fuck you, Jack.” Joe shot again, stopping Jack’s attempts to get up and pinning him to the wall again. “Cory, get the girl.”

Cory, a vamp hanging just outside the broken window, hopped in, reached down, and picked up Vivi while Kass joined him. Poor girl was scared, eyes wide and clutching her arm. Broken, from one of Steve’s punches. A young Mekhet like her wouldn’t be healing that without a day’s torpor and a fresh meal.

Joe pointed the shotgun at her chest, and fired.

“Vivienne!”

The small woman went down almost instantly. The pellets shredded in through her suit jacket, and smashed her down and back against the floor and wall as Cory let go of her. Jack stared at her, waiting for her to move, to scream out in pain, to do something, but she lay there, eyes half open, staring into space.

For a second, rage shot up through Jack like a lava geyser. If Vivi died, Natasha would never forgive him. She still felt guilty about her childe, about their failed relationship. But the rage died down before anything could come of it. She wasn’t a pile of ash. Still alive, just in torpor.

But Joe wouldn’t be for long if he kept this up. Jack tried to get up again, but again Joe shot him, and so did Cory, using Vivi’s shotgun. Cory was no ancilla, but you didn’t need to be to use a shotgun. Kass shot him too, using some large caliber pistol that would have punched holes through walls easily enough. Jack blocked them all enough to keep from getting turned into swiss cheese, but bullets were bullets and there were a lot of them. Eventually the shards of metal punctured skin and lodged into hardened insides, only to be joined by more as the bastard Carthians riddled him with gunfire.

The whole night was quickly turning into one giant mistake. Jack had been sure Garry would pull his punches, after Jack had let Tilly go. And as far as it seemed, Garry had been doing exactly that. But Joe, this rat bastard, was apparently doing this on his own. Jack had made a big, big mistake.

“Holy shit you just won’t die!” Joe groaned as he finally stopped shooting and loaded some shells. “Like shooting an elder. Except an elder wouldn’t be stupid enough to get caught with their pants down like this. Well, whatever. Fuck you and your fucking bullshit. You’re dead. We’re taking this place, then we’re gonna finish the job and take down Xnomina. You—”

Jack snapped his head up, and met Kass’s eyes. He reached out with his mind, found hers, and slammed through her gate with all the grace of a wrecking ball. He put the power of the curse behind it, dangerous as all fuck and could potentially fuck her mind up forever, but he did it anyway, and crashed through her mind’s barriers until he found the little woman and her Beast.

Stop him.

Kass dropped her pistols and grabbed Joe’s shotgun.

“The fuck!? You fucking idiot, don’t look into his eyes!”

Too late. Ventrue didn’t wear sunglasses for a reason. As long as a target could see his eyes, he could reach out and grab their mind. And he’d gotten pretty damn good at Dominating quickly over the past year. Kass didn’t stand a chance, and she wrestled Joe to the ground in seconds.

It turned into a dogpile after that, the two Carthians rolling around and struggling to get control over the other. Cory panicked and aimed down at the two wrestling Kindred, realized he was aiming a shotgun at his friends, and spun around looking for help. But Steve was in the corner of the room, trying to get his head on straight, literally, and Bella and Bruce were still grappling. Garner was outside, groaning and rolling around on the street, likely trying to get his ribs in order again.

That left young Cory, and Jack, as he got back up and glared at the man. Cory was smart enough to look down at Jack’s stomach, avoiding eye contact, but not smart enough to load another shell. Click.

Jack jumped over to him, landed in front of him, and with the ground as an anchor, drove his fist up into Cory’s stomach hard enough to tear through muscle and flesh. Oh shit, not what Jack wanted to do. The man erupted into screams of agony, and Jack threw him out of the lobby through the window with his other hand, ripping his fist out of the man’s guts at the same time. Vampire blood coated his hand, and a few seconds later, faded into ash.

Roaring, Beast in his throat dying to get out, Jack reached down and grabbed Kass. She was breaking out of his suggestion anyway, but before she did, he punched her in the back between the shoulder blades, hard. Crack. She screamed and flailed, but her legs turned into a twitching mess on the floor.

Before Jack could grab Joe though, he snapped his head to the window as another body came at him. Garner again, chest still looking a little caved in, but body functioning enough the man threw himself through the window and tackled Jack to the floor. For all Jack’s strength and power, he was still a little guy, and Garner wasn’t. The Nosferatu — everything below the nose hidden behind a face wrap with skull art on it for a jaw — got on top of Jack, and drove both of his big fists down into Jack’s face.

As long as Jack had something he could use as leverage to deal with how light he was, melee combat was easy. The curse wanted him to summon a legion of critters, an army of creatures. The curse wanted him to grab Garner’s mind and crack it, turn him into a mindless slave. But it could do brawling just fine, and Jack grabbed both the man’s fists in his palms. And squeezed.

The sensation of breaking bones in Jack’s grip had his guts churning and trying to push out food he hadn’t eaten in years. And as Garner cried out and tried to pull away, Jack brought up his knees to his chest, and smashed both feet up into the man’s already broken ribs. Cries turned into garbled squawks and wails as the man again flew out the window, and landed with a loud crack against the street.

This was insane. They knew they weren’t as strong as him. They knew he’d taken on and beaten a pack of werewolves on his own. How insane did they have to be to think they could beat him in a brawl? Either Joe and his crew were even more stupid than Jack thought, or they were up to something.

~Mulder. Scully. See anything unusual?~

~No master,~ Scully said. ~Your friends fight on roof.~

~Friends winning,~ Mulder said, ~but confused. Battle seems pointless.~

~It really fucking does. Keep me posted.~

Jack got up, grabbed the twitching Kass up off the floor, and drove his fist into her throat. Breaking someone’s fingers with his grip had been disgusting. Breaking in a woman’s throat with his knuckles was a whole other level of disturbing, and he scowled at the woman as she fell back, clutching her throat as she stared up at him, as if she could somehow find a grip that could remove the huge dent in it. Eventually she fell back to the floor, uselessly gripping at her neck as she struggled to heal her back enough that her legs could work again.

Joe, on his back on the floor, opened his eyes wide as he realized what was happening. The perfect opportunity for Jack to jump the man and give him a stern lecture.

Fuck that.

Jack kicked the man in the guts. Hard. He pulled his punches with most Carthians, but not this group, not these idiots who were stupid enough to follow Joe. And especially not with Joe.

Every action he did he was usually careful of, now that the curse was fueling his movements. It was like every movement used to be driving a simple car, but was now like driving a tank. With rockets. And with the necklace off, it was easy to turn the rockets on, and Joe deserved to get run over by a tank; kick in the guts worked fine, too.

Joe tried to yell, but all he managed was an open mouth as he flew through the air over Bruce’s head, and crashed into the other side of the lobby. The white drywall broke, and so did the wooden beams he crashed into. He didn’t have enough mass to smash through the wall and into the other side of the building, but he got halfway there, ass and parts of his legs breaking through.

Jack didn’t bother following through. He marched over to Bruce and Bella, who’d gone from a wrestling match to a chaotic mess of clawing, punching, and tearing. Say what you will about vampires, even a Ventrue gets primal when they have to, and Bruce had blood on his mouth where he’d bitten into Bella. Hopefully the man was smart enough to not swallow any.

Jack picked the woman up, and before she could so much as take a swing at him, he threw her at Joe. The younger Gangrel may have gotten stuck in the wall, but the collision with Bella was enough to drive him through it and into a storage room. Papers, more boxes; not with cigars this time.

“Holy shit,” Bruce said as he stood up and dusted himself off, suit a mess. “You really are strong.”

Jack managed a weak smile. “Yeah.”

“And you… want to get rid of this, uh, curse?”

“Yes, I do. And you’ll be happy when I do.”

“I guess. But—”

Jack put up a hand. “It’s not worth it. Trust me, ok?” Before Bruce could answer, Jack got down on a knee beside Vivienne. Still in torpor, and—

Her eyes snapped to him. “They gone?”

“What? Did you—”

She sat up, and poked at one of the holes in her jacket and blouse. “I’m not a Ventrue or Gangrel, but I am smart. Wore a bulletproof vest. Small one, pretty thin. Works well for pellets.”

He smiled. Didn’t even occur to him. The crew had geared up, and they all probably had vests on to stop something like a shotgun from blowing a hole through their chests. Last thing Jack was worried about was a gun, especially from Carthians, but that’d change once the curse was gone.

~Master. Other vampires. Leaving.~

~Thanks Scully. Keep an eye on them, but don’t risk yourself. If they notice you following them, get out of there.~ The Carthians shouldn’t have things like sniper rifles, but with Terra Den fueling their war effort, he wouldn’t put it past them.

“Alright,” Jack said, “now—”

Steve ran past him, at full speed. Kass too, recovering faster than he figured she would. Maybe he didn’t punch her back as hard as he thought. Both were still blatantly injured, and in obvious pain, but they both ran past Jack like fire was chasing them.

Jack blinked after them. That was very much not Carthian behavior. Say one thing for the asshole punk anarchists, they didn’t give up on shit. He was fully expecting to have to break their arms and legs, and send them back to Garry on stretchers or something, maybe with a post-it note on their chests with a shitty joke like ‘Package returned. Reason: Damaged goods’.

“Guess I should have snapped their legs. I…” He slowly turned to face the hole where Joe had fallen through. Bella had already gotten up, managed one quick glance at Jack, before she ran out the front door as well. With Cory and Garner already outside, that left only Joe.

Joe walked out of the storage room into the office lobby by the door, made a quick glance at the hole he’d come through, and then made a quick glance to Jack. He was good at avoiding eye contact, and kept his eyes on Jack’s chest, or looked at Vivi and Bruce instead. It took most Ventrue a lot longer than a split second to Dominate someone, but with the curse giving Jack nukes when he should have had a BB gun, he could do it fast. Joe knew it.

“Fuck you.”

Jack smacked his forehead with a palm. “Really? You somehow manage to convince Garry’s strongest Kindred to come here and start a fight over a drop zone and distribution center for fucking illegal cigars, after we’ve already fought over it, and you have the fucking nerve to stand there like I did something?”

“Fuck. You.”

Jack threw up his hands. “The fuck do you want me to do, Joe? I’m trying to keep the peace, but I’m not going to let the Carthians march over the Invictus. I—”

Joe reached behind him, and tossed a small, circular object onto the floor at Jack’s feet. He did it in such a casual way, no one even tried to stop him.

Jack had never seen one of those before, at least intact like this. But some Invictus brains had put together the remains of one, from the Xnomina attack.

Time slowed down. An instant moment of surprise turning into a spike of awareness. Jack knew what that was. Jack had seen the damage it’d done to the Xnomina building. And the Tanvar building was flammable.

Jack summoned his blood, and forced it out of him and over his body. Thick Kindred blood gushed out of him, through his pores and skin, until every inch of him swirled with writhing veins of the dark, crimson liquid. And as he summoned the power of the curse, he threw back his arm against Vivi with enough power to break bone. But he had to get her away.

Bruce was closer to Joe, but further from Jack, and further from the incendiary explosive. As the fire exploded outward, rushing out from the small device like a cracking egg filled with napalm, Joe jumped back hard, but Bruce didn’t. Jack stared, body frozen, limbs unmoving except for the one that flung out for Vivi, as the fire enveloped everything around him.

For a flash moment, everything froze, and he could see laughter in the eyes of the fire.

It crashed against his shield of Kindred blood, and the Juggernaut Discipline fought against the oncoming wave of fire. Liquid, infused with vitae, but still of Kindred, and still weak against flame. Unbelievably weak. The fire pushed against Jack, spewing everywhere in a strange, small, but point-blank explosion of something that burned. It took every bit of effort Jack had, every ounce of vitae he could summon in the instant, to keep the insane flame from reaching through the shield.

The building was just an office building. The outer walls were made of concrete, but it wasn’t like Xnomina and its use of marble. There was wood everywhere, and drywall with wooden studs, and boxes and paper and cigars and everything between. It all quickly caught the unusual flame.

Jack spun around as his self preservation reflexes finally kicked in. Move, get out of the way, get the others out of the way, do something! But he wasn’t a Mekhet or Daeva. Speed wasn’t natural for him. Even if it was, Joe’s apparent kamikaze was so insane, the fuck was Jack supposed to do? He turned and put his back to the flame as best he could, but the weird grenade had already done what it was supposed to do. Fire was everywhere.

Jack managed one quick glance back at Bruce as the man’s pants caught the flames, eyes wide with a single moment of horrified understanding, before his fellow Ventrue erupted into screams. Jack blocked them out as best he could as he scooped Vivi up, threw her out onto the street, and jumped out the window beside her. He was on fire, he knew that. The blood protected him, but it didn’t protect his suit, and the flames spread along it like kindling. He could hear it in the crackling, in the strange roar of the flame, ‘die vampire die’. He tore off his suit as quickly as he could, ripping off what remained of his jacket, shirt, and pants.

“Aaah!” Vivi, on her side on the street, shrieked as she flailed her right arm. Jack jumped up and snapped his gaze around, taking stock of the other Carthians nearby, before looking back down at Vivi. Some of the strange flame, carried by some sort of liquid, had gotten onto her arm, and was eating through the clothes and her flesh. And vampire flesh burned like paper.

Jack grabbed her arm with his blood-covered hand, pressed his shoe down against her chest, and yanked.

The arm came off easily, and he tossed it aside where it burst into flames. And he knew he’d never forget the weird sensation of how her flesh had resisted his strength for a moment before tearing.

Vivi stared at him, eyes wide, mouth open, and silence fell on them for a few seconds before she screamed again.

“My arm! My arm!”

“Vivienne! Calm down! You’ll regrow the arm eventually,” he said. She disagreed, from the noise she was making, screams and screams and screams, and existential terror in her eyes as she stared at him. Growling, he got down on a knee beside her, grabbed her by her remaining shoulder, and shook her. “You’re fine! Yes, it hurts. Yes, it’s miserable. Take a moment to feel it, accept it, and get control of yourself!”

Control. Get control of the situation. He looked around again at the nearby Carthians, but they were skulking away,

~Mulder, Scully, report.~

~Carthian vampires gone,~ Mulder said. ~Your friends, confused.~

Jack reached for his radio. Gone. He looked over at his pants with the belt and equipment, and jumped for them. Radio, destroyed. Bag! He yanked out the small bag with his necklace, and sighed relief as he plucked it free before the flames could grab it.

The Tanvar building was not so lucky. Whatever was in that weird grenade, it burned hot, and fast, and the lobby burned like a Christmas tree in July. Flame poured out of the window as the insides of the lobby erupted, wood and paint and paper exploded in heat and smoke, and Bruce was still inside.

Jack looked up. His companions looked down over the building edge, realized what the fuck was up, and bailed, jumping off the building and out windows. It wasn’t tall, and some of them landed on the ground, others on nearby buildings, and the ghouls and thralls could risk the fire escapes. They’d be fine. Vivi would be fine. The Carthians Jack had easily dealt with would be fine. Bruce would not.

Joe got out. Somehow, the stupid Gangrel clawed out of the lobby by the front door, some burn damage dealt to his chest, but he must have taken off the shirt quick. He knew what was going to happen, and how quickly to get it off him. He knew. He’d planned this.

He’d fucking planned this, to kill Jack.

Bella, Steve, Kass, Garner, and Cory all came walking toward Joe from where they’d run off to, but Jack, dressed in nothing but his fucking dress shoes and boxers, necklace bag in hand, walked over to Joe too, and put himself between him and his friends. He stared at them, his blood still pooling along his skin, and as the rage boiled up through him, the blood acted less and less like a blanket covering his skin, and more like snakes, red snakes that bore out through his skin and back into it as they coiled around him.

The four ancilla and their young friend backed off, each of them staring at him with wide, panicked eyes as he stood between them and their leader. Jack stared hard at each of them as he ground his teeth, before he turned his back to them and looked at the building. It went up in flames. Sure the building itself would be left standing when all was said and done, concrete outer walls, but everything inside was doomed.

Bruce was gone.

Jack looked back at Vivienne. She’d managed to get control of her screaming, but the look of pain in her eyes was obvious. If she’d been Blushing Life, she’d have been drenched in tears. Slowly she sat up and stared at the burning building, her empty arm socket, and then to Jack.

He hated the look in her eyes. Guilt. Thankfulness. Shame. All the shit that comes with someone else making a hard decision in her favor. Christ, he already knew how the conversation would go later, about how she felt horrible he helped her in the middle of a mini firestorm when Bruce was there too. That he’d saved her instead of Bruce, because she was Natasha’s childe, or because she was young, or because she was a girl. The thought of the conversation made him nauseous.

Jack glared down at Joe as the man got up. A big, nasty burn ran the width of his chest, deep enough Jack could see ribs; Kindred flesh didn’t sizzle, it just turned into ash wherever fire touched it, leaving a window for Jack to see Joe’s insides. The man was in agony, face scrunched up and teeth bared, but he got up to his feet anyway.

And he grinned at Jack.

Jack walked up to the much bigger man, and drove his fist into his chest. The fucker’s sternum cracked in half on impact, and Joe fell to the ground with a howl of misery. But they were just sounds. Just the sounds of a stupid man who didn’t matter.

*He’s a cocky fucker. Full of himself. Convinced he knows what everyone should do.*

Shut up shut up.

Sure enough, Joe, with a chest cavity barely working anymore, forced himself onto his hands and knees, and grinned up at Jack. The defiant grin of a delusional man thinking he was a martyr.

*You know what you want to do, Jack. Hell, you know what you should do. Joe said it himself, fuck Garry. This moron is just doing whatever he wants, against his boss’s wishes!*

Jack reached down, hooked his hand under Joe’s jawline, and picked him up until his feet were dangling. Sure Joe was a lot taller than Jack, but not so tall Jack couldn’t lift him high enough the man clutched at Jack’s wrists as he hung like a dead fish on a hook.

“Why!?”

“Fuck you.”

Jack glared hard, and with his free right hand, small bag clenched in his fist, he punched Joe in his fucked up chest. The man screamed.

“I said why!? Don’t make me tear the truth out of you, Joe. Don’t make me go dumpster diving through that fucked up heads of yours and rip out every stupid little secret you have.”

*Imagine how worthless this loser’s mind is. You think Garry has ever told him a secret worth a damn? Not a chance. He’s a maggot.*

Joe coughed between his groans of pain. “Fuck. You. You’re just a stupid Invictus. Garry’s wrong about you. The moment we turn our backs, you’ll stab us in it. You always do that. You’re all fucking evil shits, every last one of you. And you’re the worst. Viktor’s childe. Going to fuck us all over in the end.” He talked well considering how Jack was holding him, even with all the grunts and struggled words. And he managed to look in the corner of his eye toward the burning building. “I guess your friend didn’t—”

Jack lowered the man down until Joe was on his knees in front of him. They met eyes, and Joe finally showed a hint of fear as he realized what was about to happen.

The Ripper ripped his fucking head off.