

Patrick had just added the beans to the rice when the door opened. He quickly poked his head in the hall.

"Hey mom, I didn't expect you'd stop by before going to the diner."

His mother looked up from taking off her shoes, a tired expression on her face. "I'm not working tonight." She rubbed her feet. "Amanda owed me a shift for when I took hers a few weeks ago. I asked her to take mine tonight."

"Cool. Then I'll have dinner on the table in fifteen. I'll grill some bread to go with the rice and beans."

"Thank you Patrick, that's very nice of you."

She was still leaning against the wall when Patrick headed back to the stove. He stirred the beans in the rice, then turned on the oven. He took six slices of bread and put them in. The bread was going stale. He was going to have to find something to do with them before long.

He put ice in a pitcher and filled it with water from the tap and put that on the table. He tasted the rice, and added a bit of salt and pepper. They were running low on salt. They were running low on a lot of things.

His mother let herself fall in a chair and rubbed her face. As tired as she was, she looked a lot older than forty-four. Patrick wished he could do something so she wouldn't have to work so much for them to make ends meet.

"How have you been?" she asked. "It's been a few days since we've been here at the same time."

"The weekend was good. The bar was pretty busy, so the girls were able to give a bit more of their tips. And I worked a few hours at the junk yard. Joey got a few pickups of stuff from one of the manufacturing building that closed. I put what I made in your check book."

She gave him a tired smile. "Alright. I haven't had time to look at it today. I'll do that after dinner."

He filled a plate with the rice and beans and placed it in front of her then filled his plate. He took the bread out of the oven and that went on another plate. Margarine went on the table. By the weight he could tell there wouldn't be enough for both of them.

His mother cut a slice in quarters, spread margarine on them and put the pieces on her plate while Patrick grabbed glasses for them. He sat down, and she put her hands together.

"Thank you God for the food before us, for my son who works hard to make his mother happy. I thank you for the work we get, and the blessings you send our way. Amen."

"Amen."

He broke a slice and forked his food on it before shoving it in his mouth.

She took a small fork full of hers. "Slow down, Patrick. You don't have to rush off anywhere... do you?"

Patrick shook his head and forced himself to eat slower. "How was your day?"

She let out a heavy sigh. "It was okay. My department's getting a new supervisor, so everyone's nervous. They hired someone from outside, so we don't know what to expect."

"Wasn't the position open internally?"

She shook her head.

"I'm pretty sure they have to offer it to their employees before they can look outside."

She shrugged. "They're the ones who run it, they can do things however they want."

Patrick decided to change the subject. "Since you're here, do you want to go do groceries after dinner? We're pretty much out of everything. If we can get a few eggs and some milk, I can turn what's left of the bread into dessert before that's inedible." He looked at the cupboard. "If we have any sugar left. I didn't check that."

"Yes, that would be nice, going out together. I'll see how much we have available for food once we're done." She indicated the margarine as he took another slice and broke it in half. "Have some if you want."

"Thanks, I'm okay. Don't worry about it." he forked more rice on the piece and bit it in half.

She narrowed her eye at him, but didn't say anything. Once they were done eating he did the dishes while she went to her room. When he was done she came back.

"We have forty-two dollars for food this week."

"Just that? No food credits?"

"We already used what we had for this month." She sighed. "The electrical and phone bill came in today, the water's on Friday. Unless you know you're going to be making some money by then?"

Patrick shook his head. "Joey isn't expecting anything large this week. I'll look for something, but not many people want to hire a stupid school dropout, even for labor jobs."

She took his face in her hands. "You're not stupid, Patrick. I wish you hadn't had to leave school to help pay the bills."

"It's okay, Mom. I'm not complaining. It's the way things are. we'll get through it. God will see to it."

She smiled at him. "Yes, He will."

They went to the door.

"Do you want to hit the day old food store before or after the grocery?" he put on his jacket. and opened th door for her.

"Lets do that first. Hopefully we can get most of what we need there."

Patrick hoped so too. When he worked Joey fed him, so with him being here all week he'd have to go hungry if he wanted there to be enough food until next week. That or go to the soup kitchen at the back of the church.

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Patrick looked around as they walked back home, unable to shake the feeling he was being watched. He kept expecting to see Saranto colors darting about, not that he thought they'd do anything on a busy sidewalk, that wasn't their style, they liked things more under their control.

Now that he thought about it it had been a few days since he'd seen any of them. That kid who attacked him was the last time. Five days? That had to be the longest he'd gone without one of them making his life difficult. Maybe one of the other gangs was giving them troubles. He could hope any way.

"Is everything alright?" His mother asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Just looking around."

She obviously didn't believe him, but didn't say anything.

Still, he wished he knew why he felt like he was being watched.

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Donald and Daniel sat in the car, silent.

"I don't know if this is a good idea." Daniel said.

"What's the alternative?"

Daniel didn't say anything for a time. "You heard what Aaron said, Patrick thinks his father, singular, died years ago."

"Even more reasons to have the talk with him. He needs to know this stuff, otherwise it's going to drive him crazy."

Daniel sighed and nodded. He hesitated a moment then got out the car. The kids hadn't been kidding when they described the neighborhood. He knew some part of the city had been hit hard by the recession, but he hadn't thought any place had been hit this hard.

Daniel's steps faltered at the house's front yard and Donald took a few more steps before looking back at him. Daniel looked at the small house, the faded blue paint, the weed covered lawn, the gray door and barred windows. Who could live in such a place?

He forced himself forward and together they reached the

porch.

Donald knocked, and a moment later a tigress opened it. "Hello Margarett," he said before she could greet them.

Her expression was tired, but curious. "Hello. Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, we'd like to see our son."

She was confused for a moment, then her eyes grew wide, before her expression hardened. "No. Absolutely not. He's my son, not yours." She tried to close the door, but Donald held it open.

"Margarett, you signed a contract, which you broke when you vanished. We didn't pursue it back then, but if you don't let us talk with Patrick we will drag you to court over this. Our brother has an entire law firm at his disposal and believe me, we will make use of them." Donald's tone was hard.

Daniel put a hand on his brother's arm. "Donny, please calm down." He looked at the tigress. "We're not here to take him from you. We have sons, and we're happy, but he's our son too. And because of that there are things he needs to know, you too."

"He's not here," she replied, "and even if he was, I wouldn't let two fags like you get anywhere near him."

"Mom?" someone asked, further in the house. "Who's at the door?"

Donald sneered at her. "Not here, huh?" He tried to push his way past her, but Daniel held him back. "Danny, don't take her side on this. He's our son. She'd probably poisoned his mind already."

"Donny, please calm down. I'm not taking her side, I'm trying to avoid this blowing up. Margarett, regardless of how you feel about us, Patrick is our blood, and that means he needs to be told some things. I really don't want to bring lawyers into this, but we will talk with him. You can either let us do that here, now, with you present, or we can go to court, and you will lose him."

The tigress' face was a study in stubbornness, broken only when her son appeared behind her.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Hello Patrick. I'm Daniel, this is Donald. We're your fathers."

The tiger eyed them for a moment. "Is this a joke? Mom, who are these fuckers?"

"Watch your language, Patrick," She whispered reflexively. Then her body deflated. "Come on in."

"Mom? what's going on?" Patrick moved aside as his mother ushered the two tigers in.

Daniel and Donald entered a small living room, crowded

with Christian symbols, crosses on the wall, angels on the tables. The small couch was upholstered with Cherubs.

"Sit down, Patrick." Her voice still barely above a whisper.

She indicated two seats for Donald and Daniel to take, but they sat on the couch, close together. Donald smirked at her.

Resigned, she didn't say anything.

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"Mom?" Patrick was worried about her, he'd never seen her look so completely defeated. Not even when she'd lost the job she had before the diner, for not putting out to the owner.

She sat and didn't look up from the floor. "one of them is your father."

huh? "What? What do you mean, 'one of them'?"

"I had sex with them and nine month later you were born.

He stared at her for a long moment, just repeating what she'd said in his head. she wouldn't look up at him. he clenched his teeth, grabbed the picture frame on the side table and shook it at her. "Then who the fuck is that?"

She looked up at it, then away.

"You told me my dad was a war hero! You said he was deployed to Kenya just after I was born and died there saving his men! Are you telling me that was a lie? That I'm the son of one of those fags?"

One of them made to stand, but the other held him down, getting a glare in return. Patrick could see the one glaring about to explode in anger, but he contained it and sat back down.

The one holding him looked at Patrick, and Patrick realized who they were. They had seemed familiar on first seeing them, although he had no idea why, but now he realized they were those guys' fathers. He also realized he couldn't tell them apart. "You're gay too, Patrick."

"No!" he yelled, and his mother echoed him.

"You can deny it all you want," he said, "but it's in your blood."

"No, I'm not a fag," Patrick growled. "I'm straight. I'm no sinner."

"What the fuck does sinning have to do with anything?" the angry one growled back.

"Donny," the other one warned and was glared at again.

Patrick let out a sardonic laugh. "What's it go to do with it? Everything. I'm a church going Christian. I've read the bible. I know right from wrong. I know being a fag's a sin." He wasn't a fag. There was no way he could be like that.

"So is lying," the calm one said in a soft voice, looking at his mother, who looked away. He turned his gaze on him. "Patrick, If you don't want to act on it, that's your choice, but you need to know who you are. As our son, you are gay. That's in your blood. You can deny that you get turned on by watching guys in the locker rooms, but it doesn't change the fact that you do."

Patrick tried to stare him down, to prove to him, and himself that what he was saying was wrong. He wasn't going to admit it to him, of all people. He was unable to hold the gaze for more than a few seconds, his ears burned as he looked away.

"It isn't a sin," the tiger continued. "And it isn't a choice. If you decide not to act on it, make sure it's because you're making an informed decision, not because you're afraid." He stood. "Come on Donny, it's time to go."

The angry one, Donny, startled then his face twisted in anger.

They other one, Patrick through he'd said his name was Daniel took a card from his wallet and handed it to him. "I understand that this is a shock. If you want to ask us questions this is our number. Any time, day or night, call us." He took Donny's arm in his hand, but it was wrenched out as Donny stormed out.

Patrick watched as the door closed behind them. he wasn't a fag it kept telling himself. He didn't care what they said. They couldn't make him one just by stating it.

he realized he was still holding the frame, and looked at it. His mother, in her early twenties with a man she'd claimed was his father.

"Who is he?" She looked at him and he shook the picture. "Who the fuck is the guy in this picture?"

She eyed it, and her face softened. "He's a friend."

"He's alive?"

She shrugged. "I guess. I don't know. I knew him when I was studying in Iowa."

"And did you fuck him too? Is there any chance I'm really his son?"

She shook her head.

"That's great, that's just fucking great. I've got a fag for a father and you never through to tell me that? You just made up a lie about who my father was?"

"I wanted you to be proud of him, not afraid he was going to hell."

"And what about my soul? didn't you ever think about that? you heard them, I'm a fag too."

"They're lying, you're my son."

"How the fuck do you know." the words slipped out and he couldn't take them back. But he wasn't going to add anything. Let her wonder what he meant. The dreams he'd had would stay in his head. How he'd felt in the locker room at school would stay there too.

"I took you away from them to protect you. Don't you see? If I'd let them have you, you would have been drawn into a life of sin."

"And living a lie is so fucking much better."

"Watch you language Patrick Sanders."

"Don't fucking tell me what to do!"

"I'm you're mother! You're going to do as I say!."

"You're nothing more than a fucking liar!" The picture frame flew by her head before exploding on the wall. Patrick didn't stay to watch her reaction. in a few steps he was at the door, his jacket in hand, and then he was out the door, slamming it shut.

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Daniel sped up to reach the car first. he didn't want Donny behind the wheel in his state. He grabbed onto the door and blocked his brother, which earned him another glare. For a moment he thought Donny would shove him out of the way, but with a curse he went on the passenger side. Daniel sat and put his hands on the steering wheel. For a long moment the only sound in the car was Donald's heavy breathing.

"Go ahead," Daniel whispered, "Let me have it."

"What the fuck was that?" Donald yelled. "You saw what the woman's done to our son, He's fucking terrified of who he is!"

Daniel closed his eyes. He hated seeing his brother when he lost his temper like that, so he wasn't going to look at him.

"What did you want me to do, Donny?" He kept his voice calm, a counter point to his brother's scream, but all he wanted to do was cry. "We can't change things just by sitting down and having a talk with him. something like this isn't going to happen over night."

"So that's your idea? leave him with his mind twisted mother so she can add to the damage she's already inflicted?"

Daniel flinched at the accusation. He could feel his eyes getting wet. he took out his phone and offered it to his brother.

"What's that suppose to be for?" he growled.

It took effort to keep his voice steady. "Go ahead, call Damian. Tell him to come take our son and bring him to that bedroom he has ready so he can do what ever he thinks is needed to fix him."

Donald was silent.

"Fuck." A fist slammed on the dash. "Fuck." Again. "Fuck!" Again. "FUUUUUUCK!" When the scream ended the silence was deafening.

Daniel let the silent hang for a long moment before opening his eyes. Donald was crying. He pulled him against him and rested his head on his shoulder and both of them cried.

When he looked up and dried his eyes, he saw Patrick walk down the road, away from them. He thought about going after him, but there was nothing he could do right now. They all needed to take some time to let the night settle.