

~~Jack~~

Back at the burned apartment building, alone this time, and using his free time as well. Course, Invictus didn't exactly mandate hours, but you were expected to work a certain amount. Work above that, accomplish things, and you moved up in rank and social standing; which was like gold in the Invictus. And he wanted to figure this out, who burned down this building, who killed Barry.

He stood atop the ceiling of a neighboring building. The sun had just set, and he only had a couple hours before he was supposed to visit Antoinette, to join her. They were going to the ball together. Ugh, butterflies in his stomach refused to settle. Maybe some work would calm his nerves, so he decided to spend more time on the investigation. With dusk only having just passed, there were still plenty of people out on the street, even in this part of town, so he kept to the rooftops. Up here, he could hide well enough, even without Amanda. And this close to North Side, this part of the city was pretty dark anyway.

He got down on a knee — careful of his suit — and looked across the way to the ashes and ruins of the destruction. Still surrounded by police tape, still being investigated by the humans. Perhaps they'd find something? If they did, Jessy would notify him; Invictus had their eyes and ears on everything the police touched, after all. No word though, and likely that the police wouldn't find anything anyway, not with no evidence. A burned down old apartment building wasn't exactly uncommon.

But maybe the animals knew more?

He looked around from his perch. No rats. Well, maybe there was, but it was dark and he was high up while rats preferred the ground. But, there were three animals cities always had in droves. Rats, cockroaches, and crows. Other animals too, but those three would stand the test of time and outlive them all. Cockroaches were just resilient to the point of absurdity, but rats and crows were smart, damn smart. And they made the perfect informants of the animal kingdom.

He looked around and behind him. A couple of crows stood upon the ceiling with him, upon its ledge and emitting the occasional caw. When he turned to face them, they both looked over their shoulder to look back at him, complete with a couple ruffles of their feathers.

He took an unneeded breath, and met the gaze of one of the crows. Feral whisper, Julias had called it. Bringing up the beast in the gut, taking it to the surface, using its animal nature to communicate with other animals. He did not like the beast, did not like the predatory impulses it sent

him, did not like how it forced him to think of other people in terms of dangerous or not, food or not, competitor or not. And, when hungry enough, the beast took over and sent the vampire into a frenzy. The aftertaste of its presence was forever on his tongue, and he could just barely make out the blurry memories of the insanity. Almost a year ago, the hazy images in his brain showed him grabbing an innocent woman, drinking her dead, and dragging her corpse up a building like some sort of leopard taking its fresh kill into the trees.

Nope, don't go down that road. It was a long time ago, and every vampire had to deal with frenzying. Many of them didn't really care if they killed an innocent in the process; just part of being Kindred, losing your humanity, your connection to the human race. The fact it still ate at him just meant he still had that humanity, and he should keep it that way.

Another breath, and he stepped toward the crow. "Come here." Spoken in English, but the words carried the animal power from his chest, from the strange beast lurking in his ribs and always on the prowl, looking for escape. The two crows looked at each other, then him, like he was the craziest two-legged thing in the world.

Until he came closer, and said it again, vitae flowing through his dry veins and bringing out the feral whisper within. "Come here."

He could almost see the dawning of awareness in their black eyes. Beautiful creatures, crows, and the way they held themselves always denoted a degree of analysis, he thought, even before he was Kindred. And now, as he crossed the gap between animal and vampire, he came closer, and closer, and let the voice of his beast come to the surface.

"Come here."

The two crows hopped over to him. He smiled, held out his arm, and both birds flapped their wings until they'd found comfortable spots on his forearm to perch. Excellent. Not so excellent for his suit, with bird claws digging into the sleeves, but he'd live.

"How much do you two remember about the fire that happened here?"

The two birds made some quiet clicking noises. And, through some madness that would forever surprise him, the beast lurking in his chest listened. It relayed the information, parsed it, turned it into human concepts his brain could understand. But even with that, the birds communicated with their senses, not words. And once the beast in him turned it into senses like his own, he had to make sense of it.

Crows had great memories, he knew that. Latest research suggested they had memories that lasted far longer than a day, that they could remember faces, that they could teach each other how to use tools, and a host of examples of intelligence beyond that of most animals. Not only that, but crows had better eyesight than humans. A smart Ventrue — or any Kindred who used the discipline animalism — would start to use crows more and more as they grew in power, grew in strength, grew in their ability to command multiple crows.

According to Julias, he was such a Ventrue. The ego stroking made him smile, and he smirked down at the two crows as they relayed information back to him.

Daytime, sunlight. Christ how long it'd been since he'd felt those sensations like the crows did every day, warmth and brightness. He forced back the obvious imagery of life, and through it into the details. People, people below the crows as the two birds watched from on high, up in the air where it was safe, where the air was cleaner and the noises were too. Easier to tell where things were, what things could be eaten if conveniently dropped by the humans.

So much more vivid than the rats. The rats couldn't see anything, but had a billion smells and touch sensations to share with him. The birds were far closer to humans, where sound was important, but vision was of utmost importance. And that, his brain could make better sense of, turn into more useful information as he filtered through the hundreds of men and women that walked by in their memories.

Unfortunately, as much as crows had great memories, they weren't looking for what he was looking for. They didn't have the context or need to remember things specifically in the ways humans did, so the onslaught of images, of people, of fabric covering skin, of food, and honking horns from the metal cages on wheels, wasn't broken down into weighted data. Too much of everything, without anything.

The birds clucked a few times at him.

“How about... four people, two wearing trench coats—fabric stuff that reaches the feet. Two men, two women. They... perhaps seemed dangerous?”

The crows looked around, at each other, at him, and made clicking noises a few more times. A memory, four people, standing around in evening just before dusk. They were near, and they were looking at the building. Two trench coats, two leather jackets, two men and two women. The crows had stayed away from them, and watched them for a little longer than the other humans walking around. Bingo.

“This was before the fire? Have they shown up since?” he said. The birds clicked a few noises. They didn’t know. “How about... the fire. What do you remember of the day of the fire?”

More clicks and some ruffling feathers. The birds shifted on his arm, claws scraping against the fabric, and nodded their heads up and down several times as they dug through more memories. People walking around, nothing happening, nothing special, just the building randomly catching on fire after time. When the fire caught, people came running out, but not the four people the crows recognized as dangerous. Those four were nowhere to be seen.

The fact they recognized them as dangerous though, was definitely a step in the right direction toward suspects. The only lead they had about the fire was growing to be a good lead.

“Alright, I have a party to go to. I... actually, you two, I want you to do me some favors.” The two birds ruffled their feathers a few times, and waited. “Don’t worry, I’ll give you food for a job well done.” That got some raised beaks and head turns from them. Just because he was forcing their cooperation didn’t mean he had to be a jackass about it. “Great. Now, there’s a ball I’m going to, and you two, are going to be my lookouts.”

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He was actually pretty excited. Nervous, butterflies in the stomach, but excited too. This would be the first ball he’d be going to that was open invitation for all paranormals in the city. Paranormals, was that PC? He laughed at the thought as he got out of the car and stepped onto the stairs of the Elysium tower.

This would be the first ball he’d be going to with Antoinette as his date as well, like, on the arm date, arriving together date. So excited, and terrified. He already had enough unwanted attention from everyone due to the good and bad things that kept landing on him, and this was going to put him in the center of the light in front of nearly everyone. Everyone. But it was her, his lover, the most beautiful and amazing god damn person he’d ever known, and holy shit he was excited to walk into that ball with her.

Such a change from so long ago, a lifetime ago, when he couldn’t even make eye contact with other Kindred older than him. He smiled, nodded to the security staff on his way through the tower, and down the stairs into his love’s fortress. Different man now. A different man, a diff—

Holy mother of god.

“Ah, you are here a touch early, my love.” The goddess smiled up at him from down a few stairs.

She was wearing the dress, the dress she’d described, the dress he thought for sure would be far too revealing for an actual ball. It was a tight dress, thin white fabric that hugged her curves so tight he could tell it was custom fitted to her shape. Sleeves, backless, with plunging cleavage that went down, down, down, and down until it stopped a single inch above where he knew her sex started.

The goddess chuckled, and did a slow spin, turning her head over her shoulder to watch him as he watched her. The skirt was indeed long, reaching her ankles, and split at the hip up all the way to her ribs. No underwear. A few bits of subtle white string held the sides tight to her waist, and a single string held her cleavage together... barely... not really. The cleavage of the dress pulled apart so wide, it cut straight down across the center of each breast; a hint of her pink areola were visible.

“I... I uh... not going to be able to keep my eyes off you, if you’re wearing that.”

“Oh my sweet little Ventrue, then I am afraid tonight will be difficult for you. Many Kindred will be exposing their skin, and many more will be bringing thralls and ghouls to either show off their harem, or to share for drink.” She stepped up the stairs, each showing the white shoes that had a shine and sparkle to them Jack did not recognize, but figured meant they were super expensive. Hard to admire the shoes, when his eyes were locked onto how the dress completely exposed the inside contours of her breasts. It hugged them tightly, tight enough the dress showed the shape of her nipples against the thin fabric.

“Definitely. Definitely in trouble. That said, don’t think I’ll be... taking my eyes off of you.”

“Well that is absurd. There are many beautiful men and women to appear at the ball, and I fully expect you to take a peek at each of them. The women at least.” Chuckling all the more, she came to stand beside him, and leaned forward a little to bring her lips down to his. Leaning like that made her breasts hang down, and a touch more of the edge of her nipples threatened to slip free of the hugging fabric. “You look delightful in this suit. A fashion success if I do say so, and undoubtedly Julias’s choice? You do carry the tone and texture of a fresh Kindred of this era, wearing this.”

“That was his goal, yeah. I... just... god damn.” He really couldn’t stop staring. She was still leaning forward, in the way she often did to draw his eyes to her cleavage. But the dress’s fabric was so thin, hugged her so tight, and revealed so much skin, he felt like he was looking at naked Antoinette. And he loved naked Antoinette.

“Ah, I am sorry my love. I did not think this would be so troublesome for you?” She reached down, took his hand, set it on her stomach, and guided his hands down the deep cleavage. Soft, her skin

was so soft, and alabaster, and perfect. And when she guided his fingers down to where the cleavage finally stopped, she slid his fingers down past the fabric a single inch while still against her skin. His fingertips found the folds of her pussy, and he groaned as he shivered at the touch of them.

“This dress,” she said, “is made for you, as well as for myself, my love. To excite and entice you. But I feel it has worked too well, and we must deal with that.” She pulled his hand free of her delicate folds, and brought it up to her bosom. First one, and then the other, she guided them along the undersides of her heavy, hanging breasts, and Jack got to see for himself how easy it was to nudge the dress aside to reveal both of them fully. Very, very easy.

And as he shivered with the sensation, she blushed life. Immediately her nipples began to harden, and she grinned down at him as she pressed his back to the wall on the stairway. Soon he was pinned to the black marble, staring up at the goddess leaning over him, and her breasts still dangling underneath her torso into his palms. The size of them spilled over his hands completely, dwarfing and covering them, and the silky softness of their great weight had his knees shaking.

“R-Right now?” he said.

“I must take care of you, little Ventrue, so your wandering eyes do not run away with you. Now, blush.” An order, the steel in her voice coming through, just a little bit of it, just enough to give her sultry French accent some power. Power that had him melting.

He blushed life, and his cock jumped to life against his suit pants.

“Will uh... Ashley and Julee be coming?” he said. Couldn't keep his eyes on Antoinette's eyes, not with her still leaning forward so the weight of her breasts pressed down against his palms. He squeezed them, gently, just enough to feel how they were supple, how they compressed and gave in to the shape of his fingers. Perfect pillows.

“Non. I would prefer to keep them separate from Kindred life. They are my muses, not my spies.” She reached down, and as he continued to fondle her, she undid the button of his pants. A moment later, his cock was sticking out through the flap of his boxers, and she took it into her grip while her other hand stayed to his shoulder.

She was jerking him off, in the stairway, maybe ten feet from where it opened up into the main lobby of her tower. The goddess couldn't care less if someone spotted them, at all.

She grinned down at him, one of those dangerous grins, and turned him around. With his back to her chest, she leaned down far until her chin was on his neck, her bare breasts pushed to his back and nipples pressing hard enough on the suit for him to feel it. She pushed him forward, toward the wall, so

he had no choice but to reach out to brace his hands against it while she pressed her body against him, reached around his waist, and took his cock into both hands.

“Keep your hands upon the wall, my delicious little Ventrue,” she said, “or I will have to punish you.”

He nodded, and turned his head a little to smile at the succubus. With her chin on his shoulder, turning his head made their cheeks rub together, and she chuckled before she squeezed his cock hard enough to make him wince.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good.” Her hand squeezed on the base of him, worked a single inch of his length in a stroke, while the other teased fingertips along the tip. The heat was already starting to build, and the woman knew how to milk him of the rising warmth like he was kindling in a fire. “Hundreds of Kindred and kine will see you, my love. And at this ball, I am sure some romance is encouraged, yes? You and I will kiss, and touch, and for all of Dolareido’s night populace to see. They will know that you are mine.” Her lips turned, and her fang grazed along his jawline as she nibbled on it. “You are mine.”

Hers. He could almost feel the power dripping from her words, warm, thick, like blood trickling down from her lips onto his body.

“Yours.”

The Prince purred into his ear, and squeezed his cock a little harder, before she reached up with one hand to pull her mane of hair over his shoulder. Soon the long, flowing waves of white were pouring over his chest and down to graze along where her hands again wrapped his length. He never asked about her white hair much, beyond that first meeting; seemed like it might have been rude, since she didn’t look nearly old enough for white hair. He loved her hair though, so damn pretty and wavy and long and soft to the touch. And, as she continued to stroke him, she let her hair tickle along his cock.

One of her hands drifted higher again, and found his throat. She circled the front half of it, more even, and forced his head to tilt to the side to expose his neck, like prey might when forced by a hungry vampire. Again she started to suckle on his neck, played with his earlobe, and kept her hand on his throat as she stroked him faster, until he could feel the growing waves of heat building between his legs, underneath his testicles. A drop of his precum rose to the tip of his length, and Antoinette purred louder as she slid her finger to the end of his cock, and rubbed the wetness into his foreskin. Wet, she peeled the skin away to expose the ripe head of his cock, and spread more of his precum along his glans.

Sensitive, so damn sensitive, the ripe, pink skin of his cock's head, and she caressed it with just the perfect amount of wet pressure to make the tingling sparks dance through his whole body.

Once the head of his shaft was thoroughly coated, she gripped the center of his length once more, and started to stroke him with a harder, stronger grip. A tiny groan worked its way out of him, and immediately, the devil slowed her strokes down to almost nothing.

"How many times have you cum for me, my love?" She slid her fingertips along his length, teasing her claws on the veins and skin of it, letting his fluids settle. She knew all the signs of impending orgasm, and knew when to stop so he could catch his breath and let the rising cum ease back again.

"I... I dunno, um... must be hundreds."

"And every time, the feel of your muscles flexing, the sight of your pleasure, the sounds you make, stirs within me a great need."

"You... m-maybe we could—"

"No." Her grip tightened, and she brought her hand to the base of his cock to leave it there, squeezing tightly, making his cock stand outright and ready to burst. "To satisfy me will take time, time we do not have. I will have to content myself with yours." Again, her long hair tickled along his cock, and she made sure the angle of her grip caused the white waves to trace along his glans. Until she pushed it more forward, and started to stroke him quickly again.

God, she knew what she was doing, to such a perfect degree. The rhythm, pacing, getting into a nice and pleasant tempo, familiar, inviting, loving. She pressed her back to him, squishing her bare breasts to his back until he could feel her hard nipples pressing through his suit, the softness overflowing his shoulders. All the while, she kept one of her hands secure on his throat, pinning him to her, even as she bent forward slightly so he did as well. He couldn't interfere, with her order to keep his hands against the wall. And he couldn't look down with her grip on his neck. Helpless, he closed his eyes, and let the woman work her magic.

Cum started to pour through his length, hot, tingling, each squeeze of his muscles earning more of the sweet, tantalizing pleasure of thick heat flowing through his cock. Another flex, met with Antoinette's grip rising closer to his glans, sent an almost painful wave of pleasure down his length, and a spurt of the liquid to squirt onto the wall in front of him.

"Ever so sweet," she said, and her grip on his shaft rose again. With her palm and fingers circling him just under the glans, she shifted her grip up and down, so the sheathe of his skin, along with her



fingers, and his cum, massaged and coated the base edge of the bulbous tip of his cock, the most sensitive place on his body. And he groaned. No use trying to hide how amazing it felt, how perfect it was, how her fingers caught where his cum dripped from his glans, spread the warmth around, and used it to lubricate his cock as she milked him. Again, her hair tickled along the tip of his shaft as she aimed it more upright, and growled down over him as she stroked him again, and again, and again. And once no more cum leaked from him, she milked the waves of pleasure instead, strokes shortening and becoming gentle.

“Say that you love me, my little Ventrue.”

“I love you.” So manipulative. Demanding such words after working an orgasm out of him. Hell, she was still stroking his cum-coated cock, and making him squirm as the final tingles of post-orgasm bliss started to fade. There was some definite Pavlovian manipulation going on here.

But that was fine, because he did love her.

“And I trust you to never betray our love. I do. So, do not worry if your eyes wander. The women at the ball will be dressed to invite your eyes, and it would be rude to ignore that request.” She let go of his neck at last, and lowered the hand to run a fingertip around and around the tip of his cock, spreading the soon-to-fade cum. “I would be lying if I said I did not enjoy the intrigued, aroused gazes of people, when I wear clothing such as this. Mostly, it is your gazes I crave, my dearest love, but forgive a woman for delighting in her vanity, and enjoying the eyes of strangers.”

“F-Forgiven, definitely forgiven. And can you wear that dress? More often? When we’re alone.”

She kissed his ear, and purred once again. “Of course.”

He sighed his bliss, and looked down, now that she had both hands on his length. He was still hard, and she was still massaging his length. And she wasn’t stopping.

Having sex so often, sometimes with the rather demanding task of satisfying three women, was having an effect on him. A man’s recovery period from orgasm was only a biological function after all, and Kindred could bypass any biological function with practice. Or in this case, with an conscious and unconscious need. His body, his mind, his beast, they wanted more. More.

She started to stroke him faster again, and nudged her cheek against his as she caught on. No words needed, she knew he wanted more. She brought her other hand up again to find his neck again, but this time she kept her fingers around his throat more gentle so he could look down, and watch how her beautiful, cum-coated hand worked him.

“I would be lying,” she said, “if I did not find our regular bouts to have affected me, my love. Forever I have enjoyed touch upon my breasts, but, your persistent kissing, suckling, massaging, and pampering has led to an increase in my own desire, as it has apparently done in you as well.”

“I... I um...” Too good, the sound of her husky voice in his ear as she massaged his wet cock. Cum as lubricant, joined by more precum, made everything slide perfectly along the skin, his ripe glans, so the pleasuring heat of impending climax started once again.

“To simply lay there, and let my love suckle and massage my breasts for as long as you enjoy? The thought of it leaves me dripping wet.” She whispered the words directly into his ear, and her stroking hand grew faster. “And to sit upon you, hold your length sheathed inside me, and cradle your head to my breasts, is bliss. Utter bliss. Or, to touch myself, my breasts, to caress them as you set your lips upon my folds, and your fingers within my recesses?” She pressed herself to him harder, until her nipples were stabbing him like diamonds. “I can feel myself dripping down my thighs, at this very moment, at the thought. I—”

He came again.

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They took a limousine, a proper, fancy, large limousine, with more than enough room for half a dozen people to sit around comfortably. Course it was just him and the Prince, and she snuggled up against the side of him as he sat down.

God, he still couldn't keep his eyes off of her. The dress exposed so much skin, skin he'd been fondling only moments before, skin he'd covered in his cum dozens of times. Maybe if they had time, she'd—no no, she just gave you a handjob, you idiot, two at that. And you're on the way to an important and expensive party, a ball, had by your covenant. Yes, there will be women there, scantily clad. Yes, there will be thralls and ghouls there, for showing off, for drinking, and even sharing. Yes, vampires were going to get horny, and have to contain that arousal until they went home. It was only natural sex was going to be on his mind, especially with Antoinette sitting beside him with her breasts almost completely exposed, and every inch of her stomach all the way down to her mons pubis also exposed.

Memories of so many nights, sitting on her waist and coating that valley of skin in his cum, refused to stay put. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop picturing the beautiful woman next to

him, with her dress pulled apart again so he could caress and suckle on her nipples while she stroked his head, cradled him, while she jerked him off again.

“My love, I can see that twinkle in your eye.”

“W-Wha? Oh, sorry, just... can't help but stare at you wearing that.” He gestured to the plunging cleavage that reached far far below her navel, and how it was just a loose, single string that kept the cleavage from parting to fully expose her nipples.

“After what I did but twenty minutes ago? My, your sex drive is boundless.”

“I'm sorry! Just... embraced pretty young, you know?”

“That you were. And, to my delight, a young man such as you will forever, eternally lust with such vigor.” She reached out, slipped her arm behind his back, and settled it on his shoulders while her other hand reached down, took one of his hands, and guided it to her lips. Kiss, kiss, more kisses on his knuckles as she grinned at him with that mischievous devil gaze. “If my hands were not enough, when this ball is fini, I will take care of you once again. Though, this time, you will be satisfying my needs first.” Another kiss, this time with a hint of her fangs putting pressure on his skin. “Multiple times.” And she was using her order voice. Not a request then.

“Yes ma'am.”

“Merci beaucoup. I expect to have your tongue upon my breasts and my folds for the remainder of the night.” A tight hug, and she leaned down to plant a kiss upon his head. “But, perhaps tomorrow, we could embark on a social activity less sexual?”

Well, they did have sex. A lot. All the time. He always wanted it and she always wanted him to want it. But he did want to do more, just never knew what she'd want to do.

“Any ideas?”

“Ben oui. I believe there are operas you may enjoy, and you wished to hear more of my cello playing, did you not?” She gave him another kiss on his buzzed hair, and released his hand only to set her hand on his chest and adjust his suit. Shoulder was probably sitting off center or something. “Or perhaps, we could simply sit down together, and watch television?”

“I have to admit I have a hard time imagining you enjoying television.”

“I have seen the rise of radio, the phone, television in its original form, blurry images of black and white, and have seen the growing era of virtual reality. But, you are correct, it is rare for me to enjoy a television show. Trite garbage.”

He laughed. Yeah, it was garbage. “But not all of it’s horrible garbage. Some of it is good garbage. I’d say we could both binge watch a show sometime, but that doesn’t really work unless you’re willing to sit down for three or four hours a night for a few nights straight.”

“Alas, that would not work for either of us. Perhaps a movie?”

Try as he might, he couldn’t stop the smile from sneaking onto his lips. Hearing her, her French accent, and her godliness say ‘movie’ was just too cute.

“Ashley and Julee don’t try and force you to watch movies? Romcoms or such?”

“Oh, the two little minxes try, but they fail. For you though, little Ventrue? I am willing to experiment.” Another kiss for his head, and her roaming hand found his neck, where she adjusted the collar of his shirt. “A trade of tastes. You test your palette upon my flavors of choice, and I yours. Though, as the woman in this relationship, I fully expect to have an unfair bias in this exchange, in my favor.” As if to prove her point, she pressed the side of her body into his, her nearest breast pushing to his shoulder as she ran her hand down his body and down to his leg, near his crotch. “Non?”

“S-Sure! Yeah, um, opera right? I’ll try it, gladly.” He grinned up at the goddess. Christ she could be so damn sexy, just being playful, and fun. And scary when she wanted to be too. Even now, he could catch just a hint, just a wisp of her dominant side coming through, where each proposition she made, each request, held a hint of danger if he said no to any of them. Of course, she’d never hurt him for saying no, but it was definitely not a word she was used to hearing. And he had no reason to say it.

“Bien.” And yet another kiss on his head, before the woman turned to look out the window of the limousine. “I do wonder as to the arrangements Julias and his council have made for this ball.”

“You don’t know? I just assumed they’d tell you. I don’t know either.”

“A surprise is a part of the experience.” Shrugging, her arm around his shoulders bent a little, so she could set her fingers on his ear, and lightly tug on and stroke his earlobe while still looking out the window. “But I can speculate. This is a ball to remind us all of, and embrace the peace the city holds. As such, I expect music, jovial and classical, while there will also be seating, with thralls being drained and blood set into wine glasses. Some of the more adventurous will drink directly from the source, while some Kindred will prefer to keep such acts private, to at least some extent. So the wine glass will be a common choice for tonight; perhaps goblets, for the Primogen and myself. There will be no formal dinner, but rather tables along the walls of the main chamber, where people may sit if they wish, or rise and dance to the music if they wish. And, if the past is any indication, more than a few kine will be naked and thoroughly drained, of blood and more, before the night is done.”

“... you speculate all this?”

“My love, when you are as old as I, these things become routine.” Her smile faded, and she looked back to him as her eyes grew heavy. “A different topic. I understand most Kindred are finding safer places to rest come sunrise. What have you done?”

Right, that. Julias had told him, but he wasn't really sure what to do. He'd never made a 'secure' sleeping den before. “Nothing yet.”

“Then, please, sleep within my tower until you find a safe place to spend your days.”

“Really?”

“Oui. My little Ventrue, you sleep upon my bed half the days of the week as is.”

“Yeah, but, sleeping every night? Sounds like we're moving in together.”

She leaned down toward him, planted a kiss upon his lips, and nudged her nose against his. “You will still have your normal living den, for your nightly activities. But come the day, come to my bed chambers, rest your head upon my bosom, and fall asleep in my arms.”

He smiled, and nodded. He could do that, gladly.

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~~Natasha~~

She'd narrowed the choice down to two dresses. One was a beautiful, simple ivory dress that had straps, some moderate cleavage that worked nicely with her tiny — frustratingly tiny — breasts, and a long skirt that hugged the legs pretty tight all the way down to the ankles. It was smooth, silky, and very pretty. The other dress was red, very bold, and it too was a dress with straps, except the skirt only reached a couple inches down her thighs, open back, and the cleavage was plunging and reached below the navel.

She wanted to wear the ivory one. Jessy told her she should wear the red one. But now she was alone, in her new apartment, without Jessy to bully her into trying something she didn't want to try. Jessy was so bold, she'd probably long forgotten that she was an aggressive woman at all. Just watching

her and Fiona throw themselves at that Eric fellow was like watching two teenagers trying to out-slut each other. No, that wasn't fair to them. Still though, pretty awkward.

That Eric man was very attractive though. Not as big as the other bouncers, but he reminded her of Garry, a very dangerous man; so of course Jessy threw herself at him. And she was sure the woman would get into his pants eventually, or maybe Fiona would? It turned out Fiona wasn't the sexual predator she'd made herself out to be, or told Damien she was, apparently. Flirtatious sure, but not the sort of girl to sleep around. Or maybe she wanted to be, and that was part of why she came to Dolareido from her home town, cause in Dolareido people slept with each other as much as shaking hands?

Stalling, Natasha, you're stalling. Pick a dress. She frowned, laid them both on the bed beside each other, and compared. Both designed to fit her small body, but one was classy, the other looked like something Jessy might wear. Hell the other looked like one Jessy might fuck in, in Bloodlust.

Some knocks at the door. Sighing, Natasha walked over to the door and peeked through the view hole. She was expecting Jessy to pay a surprise visit, and—wait, that was Art, and Matt! She looked down at herself, and sighed. Just a white t-shirt and her pajama bottoms. Pink pajama bottoms.

Go change! No, don't change. She didn't need to wear better clothes for her boyfriends. Hehe, boyfriends, plural. Remember what Antoinette said, about embracing the things you like, and that the boys probably liked you despite your attempts to hide your true nature, not because of hiding it.

She opened the door. "Hello Arturo, Matthew."

"Hey babe," Art said, evil grin fully adorned as he stepped into her place.

Matt followed in behind him, his smile much more warm and inviting. Not that she disliked Art's more mischievous, devil smile, but she had to admit, it was the combination of Matt and Art's personalities that made them so appealing together. "Hey Tasha. Like the pajamas."

"D-Do you?" She stepped away and smiled a little smile, before she reached down and tried to smooth them out. "They're uh... p-pretty... um..."

"Very pretty." Art chased after her, a little faster than she was backing up, and he set his hands on her hips as she continued backing up, until Matt caught him by the back of the collar. Like catching a horny dog by the leash.

"Dude, shoes."

Rolling his eyes, Art let go of her and got down to a knee to undo his shoes, leaving Natasha giggling and smiling.

“I like w-what you’re wearing t-too. Handsome.”

They grinned and nodded, like young boys given treats. The two of them were wearing gray suits. Normal suits you’d wear to a nice party; no ties though. Someone must have told them about the unusual dress code of the ball, the weird formal-but-not-so-formal-also-unique style of it. It looked great on them. She did always like how a suit emphasized shoulders, and both her boyfriends had big shoulders.

“What’re you b-boys doing here? I thought I was g-g-going... to meet you at the ball?”

“Meet us?” Matt said. “Come on, you know the guy has to show up at the girl’s place and take her on the date.”

“I... I guess, I j-just haven’t even gotten dressed yet! I’m trying to pick.”

“Well I think we can help with that.” And, again, Art came after her, like a wolf chasing prey. She made a tiny squeak and ran away, only for the man to chase her down until she was cornered in the center of the room. Trapped!

Art reached out for her, like a beast trying to grab her, and she slipped under his hands. But Matt was waiting for her, and she squealed as the man caught her in his massive hands.

In the two minutes since their arrival, she’d regressed to a silly little girl. And it was fun! Fun. She laughed as the giant flipped her over his shoulder, and she set her elbows against his back as she looked at Art, once the big guy turned around.

“Y-yeah, um, I have two dresses picked out, on my bed.”

“Two? Hell I’ve known girls who were still working on ten this far out from a party,” he said.

“Well, I’m n-not most girls. I like to prepare.”

Matt nodded from underneath her, and pat her leg a couple times as he walked toward her room. Once in there, he set her down gently, and stood by the edge of her bed to look down at the two dresses she’d laid out. Art did too, standing opposite of Matt so she was standing between the two of them.

“So,” Art said, “your options are slutty, or classy? Red, or white?”

“Y-Yeah. And, n-n-not white. Pale skin and white... d-d-don’t match. It’s ivory.”

Matthew scooped up the ivory dress. Art scooped up the red dress. “Try this,” they both said, at the same time.

Oh good god the dresses were a metaphor for her boyfriends.

But Art rolled his eyes and tossed aside the red dress. “I’m kidding. You’d really be comfortable at a party wearing something like this?”

“Well... n-no, but Jessy—”

“You’re not Jessy,” he said. “And besides, the white dress is beautiful. Isn’t it Lenny?” And of course he slipped in white again, knowing full well it’d frustrate her, calling it the wrong color.

“It is. Very classy.” Matt set the dress on her shoulder, and smiled down at her. Big, warm, happy smile. “I mean, by all means wear the red dress. When you’re with us. In private.”

She giggled again, and nodded as she scooped up the red dress before putting it away in her closet. But, as she did, she felt the looming presence of people behind her. Turning around, she gasped as she found Art, once again, reaching out for her. His hands took her hips, and the man brought her in closer to him, pressing his hips to hers. Except he was so tall, it was more like him pressing his hips against her stomach and chest.

“You... I know that look! W-W-We... don’t have time for that!”

“You sure?” This time it was Matt with the devious grin on his face, and he sat beside the dress on the bed as he watched her. “We got what, thirty minutes before we should probably head out? Plenty of time.”

Art nodded like the crazy man was making sense. He very much was not.

“I need time to put on makeup! You know, b-b-ball makeup, and stuff. You know? G-Girl stuff.”

Art sat down on the bed as well, and both boys pouted the most ridiculous pouts she’d ever seen. Matt could pull it off, but on Art, it just looked he was being sneaky and manipulative again, and obviously so.

“O-Ok,” she said. “Um... after, after the ball, w-we can... have sex.”

The two boys perked right up, like she’d given them candy. Boys! Just a pair of silly boys. Except, when they were on her, holding her, doing things to her, they stopped behaving like silly boys. Far more mature, far more... dominant. Maybe just a quickie? No! No stop thinking about it, you have a ball to get ready for. And besides, you prefer it when you get to dedicate some time to the act, not just ten minutes.

“Ok, I have to get dressed n-now.”

“Ok,” they both said, in unison, while they smiled and watched her. Neither got up to move.



“Boys! A lady, n-needs... t-t-to...”

“You know we’ve seen you naked right?” Matt said.

Art, complete with a nod and a dismissing wave, grinned. “Lot more than that.”

She couldn’t deny that. The three of them had been all over each other for many nights now, to the point it was interfering with her work. But it was hard to stop! God, she had no idea how addicting sex could be, when you found someone you fit with sexually, an ebb and flow where everything just sort of lined up naturally.

She was supposed to be looking for a new place to sleep too, somewhere more secure, while Barry’s death was being investigated. The Prince had offered her one of her many guest rooms in her tower’s underground bunker, so perhaps she should just bite the bullet and sleep at the Prince’s? But then, what about Arturo and Matthew? She didn’t want them to stop visiting her, and they very well might if she was sleeping in Elysium tower.

“Fine, f-fine! Fine.” Glaring daggers into her two boyfriends, she started taking off her t-shirt. Boyfriends, plural. Hehe.

Both guys leaned back, and watched, hunger in their eyes. She could see the growing thirst on their faces, how their muscles tensed slightly as she finally got the shirt up over her head, and pulled it down past her long dark hair. Topless, wearing nothing but pink pajama bottoms.

She looked down at herself. A tiny body, little breasts, a flat stomach and a skinny waist, but not very curvy hips. Antoinette’s words sprung up from her memory though, reminding her of what she’d said, about her, her size, her attitude and personality, and wearing pink in front of the boys. And, it was working. The two of them looked ready to tackle her, grab her, pin her to the bed, pry her open with their fingers, and—

Stop thinking about it! At least she didn’t have the blush of life going, so the arousal running through her mind wasn’t manifesting, otherwise her nipples would be diamonds by now. And with the two boys staring at her and her breasts, she knew they’d both be devouring them. Her. Everything. She shook her head, hard, so her hair flew about a bit as she forced the thoughts from her mind.

“Showing off for us?” Art said.

“What? N-No, just... nevermind.” They were tempting fate, watching her change, but she’d told them no sex until later and she was going to stick to that. So, she slipped out of her pajama bottoms, and walked over to her wardrobe. A glance back showed both men had tilted their heads to the side, in

unison, to stare at her butt. She frowned at them, but when she looked back to her wardrobe and pulled open a drawer, she smiled where they couldn't see. They liked her butt.

Maybe... maybe she could do a little teasing? Just a little. She had to be careful, cause she knew if she pushed the two wolves too hard, they'd just jump her, and to hell with the party. Which was tempting too! But, the Prince would be very angry with her if she didn't go. It was her job to learn things, discover things, learn about the Uratha and the Begotten at the party, meet people and develop connections. The Danse Macabre. So no teasing. Control yourself.

She dug through her underwear drawer, and reached for a boring pair of white underwear. But, Antoinette taught her to not wear white underwear with a white — ivory — dress. Either black, with specific intent to let people see it, or something the color of skin, to hide its presence.

Or none at all.

She shivered. No underwear, at a ball? Well it wasn't like she'd be the only one. She'd been to one of these parties before, and the sexual atmosphere was almost palpable, with women wearing clothes straight off the runway that exposed breasts completely, and men more than happy to show off some muscle. Vampires didn't sweat, didn't give off body odor — except for maybe a little stale air from being a walking corpse — so it wasn't like they couldn't take advantage of clothes humans couldn't. Full suit of leather? Jessy wore that on a regular basis, because she had no reason not to. Corsets? Lot of women wore them, absurdly tight too; no need to breathe after all.

Jessy would tell her to wear a black thong, and let people know she had a butt, a nice, tight little butt. Her words. But that wasn't Natasha either. She liked being secretive, and she liked being playful, behind closed doors.

She closed the underwear drawer, nothing in hand, and walked back to the boys. Managing a tiny smile, she slipped the white dress on over her head, and tucked down on the hem to get it snug to her body. Down and down it went until it covered most of her legs, but the dress itself was quite tight, to contrast the conservativeness of the length. Antoinette had suggested it'd go nicely with her 'secretly sexy' vibe she gave off.

Both boys jawdropped, and stared at her. "Wow." Again, in unison.

"It's so... t-t-tight, I can barely move. And..." She looked down, and frowned. The fabric wasn't very thick, but not see-through. Still, it hugged her breasts tight enough to give the subtle hint of her nipples, despite their softness, as she was not blushing life.

Like some sort of four-armed monster, the two men reached out for her, took her hands, and pulled her closer to them.

“H-Hey! We... no no, we can’t.”

“We won’t,” Matt said. But, even saying that, he kept her hand in his, and set one hand on her hip as he pulled her in until she was standing between the two sitting men. “Just, damn.” And, as the giant smiled at her, he leaned in, and set his lips to hers.

“You are the most petite little piece of delicious.” Art, devil smile carrying the corny compliments and all, leaned in as well and started putting kisses on her neck, her collar, and her bare shoulder.

Two big guys, boys, men, touching and kissing and—

No! She slapped their hands away and frowned. Frowning didn’t work so well, earning only more smiles and chuckles from them, but at least they stopped kissing and touching her. Later, she could indulge later.

“Who else from your p-pack is coming?” she said.

Art shrugged and looked at Matt. “Clara is, and Mason I think has a date with some girl from the Carthians.”

“... he does?” She skipped over to her nightstand and grabbed her phone. Note: Mason Harding has a date with a Carthian Kindred.

“Keeping tabs on us?” Matt said.

“Um... yeah. Y-You know, cause... yeah, my job. Part of it-t-t... anyway.”

They laughed again, and watched her from the bed as she stepped into the bathroom across the hall. The doors lined up, so they could see her as she pulled out her kit and got to work.

“Easy to forget sometimes that you vamps are still vamps,” Matt said. “It’s a really nice place here, Dolareido. I mean damn, hadn’t expected to hear Mason be happy for a while, but that girl sure put some smile on his face.”

Natasha peeked out from the bathroom to look at the boys. “D-Do you know her name?”

Matt nodded. “Yeah, think I heard it was... Tilly?”

“Oh.” Yeah she knew of Tilly. Mischievous woman, that kind of reminded her of Rebecca. Well, good riddance to Rebecca, but Tilly seemed nice enough. “Hope... he enjoys himself. She’s v-very pretty.”

“Not as pretty as you.” Again, in unison!

“Ok, that w-w-was practiced! You two can’t speak t-together like that all the time... d-do you?”

Art shrugged and gave Matt a bit of a shove. Matt returned it, and being a bigger guy, forced his friend to fall off the bed with a loud thunk. Art of course got up and shoved Matt back harder.

“We’ve been buds for decades,” Matt said. “Just happens with time.”

That made sense, and there were plenty of things about her and Jessy that were automatic, knowing each other as long as they did. Natasha nodded and resumed her work. She needed a better foundation setup if she was going to put on her ballroom face. Mascara, lipstick that fit her pale skin with a bit more boldness, and she had to do something with her hair. Normally she’d just do a simple ponytail, or leave it loose, but maybe tonight she’d try something fancier.

Art poked his head in, but before he could speak, she turned to look at him, and tilted her head to the side.

“W-What should I do with my hair?” she said. Asking her boyfriend what to do about her hair was a secret guilty pleasure she’d long wanted to indulge in. Maybe he could do her hair too? That’d be perfect.

“Hair like yours? Think we could get away with some lavish shit. C’mere and I’ll try some fancy ponytails out.”

Oh my god he could actually do her hair! She almost squealed.

“H-How do you know how to do ponytails?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” He winked at her, and guided her back into the bedroom.

Before she knew it, she was holding a mirror in her hands, while Art was doing her hair, and Matt watched, offering occasional comment. It was too perfect.

Boyfriends, plural. Hehe.

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~~Jack~~

Well. Damn. Everything right down to the music, she guessed correctly.

“Now presenting, Alder Antoinette of the Ordo Dracul, Prince of Dolareido. And her companion, Master Terry of the Invictus.”

Oh god damn it. Jack turned his head just enough to glare at the man calling out titles, master of ceremonies or whatever, and made sure the man realized he was upset. But Antoinette slipped her hand down to hook it with his arm, and started to walk them down the stairs into the grand room of the Invictus ball.

Massive chandeliers, enormous paintings on the walls of figures that must have been gods, red-lined chairs around the tables, each table covered in a red table cloth with gold embroidery. And on the other side of the grand room, two stairways that curved up and in toward a balcony that overlooked the ball room. But this time, instead of Viktor and Garry have a conversation on said balcony, Jack could see the movement of a dozen hands playing instruments. A small symphony, playing the night's music.

Grand, beautiful, and extravagant. The Invictus did love to throw their money around. But who was he to complain, or compare, when the Prince did the same thing at her balls.

The whole room turned to face him. As was custom, the Prince arrived fashionably late, and since he was her date, that included him. The Invictus preferred punctuality, but hopefully they'd understand in this circumstance.

“You use the title Alder? I remember that from before,” he said as they walked down the stairs into the grand room.

“It is not meant as offense to the Invictus, but a statement of force. I am here, and as much as your superiors love to feel they own the city, it is only because I let them. Jacob indulges the title as well, for the same reason.”

“Jacob thinks he owns the city?”

“The old snake does think that. He does not, but, I would be a fool to bring strife over his harmless delusions.”

Jack strongly doubted the man's delusions were actually harmless, and Antoinette must have known that. He looked her way a little longer, long enough to catch a hint of doubt in her eyes. He understood, completely, that Jacob was the x factor in her life, her city, the unpredictable element she couldn't get rid of, who was just too damn strong to remove. If she'd truly wanted to make it happen, she could probably force out the Uratha, and the Begotten, but Jacob? Man was too smart.

And, maybe, once upon a time, the two of them had been friends. They'd come to the city together, after all, so long ago, worked together to make it a reality, and succeeded. That must have meant something to her, to him.

Jack looked out to the crowd. They'd acknowledged his appearance for a moment, but by now his relationship with the Prince was becoming a normal thing; or at least, normal enough to not gawk at. Instead, older Kindred came up to the Prince, and thus began the Danse Macabre, the subtle manipulations, the dialogues meant to tease out information or plant subliminal misdirections.

First were the Invictus. Jack lowered his head as they approached.

"Master Terry," the triumvirate said.

Ghost lady was wearing a white dress, like usual, but with a corset and a wedding veil, along with long sleeves, white gloves, and such. Covered her disfigurements, without ruining the aesthetic of the ball. Mister big bad McDonald was wearing his usual suit, except he had no tie and the shirt was undone a few buttons to show some skull tattoos on his chest. And of course Julias was there, wearing a similar suit to McDonald, open shirt, with some jewelry Jack hadn't expected. A couple of subtle rings, and a necklace that had a small design he didn't recognize hanging against his sternum.

"Your excellencies," he said, and bowed his head.

"Good evening my Primogen," the Prince said. She used the word 'my' with a touch more emphasis than he expected, not dissimilar to how he used to have to say 'my Prince' to her, when they first met. Guess she was driving home that she was their ruler, and currently dating the man they were all looking down at. Not looking down at him really, but maybe Antoinette was feeling a little defensive for him.

Should he be offended by his girlfriend defending him? Ha, fuck no.

"Prince," the three said, eyebrows raised a touch as they caught onto the vibe she was laying down. Yeap, his girlfriend was subtly scary when she wanted to be.

"A delightful gathering!" The Prince raised a hand and made a sweeping gesture to the glorious display around them. "And, dare I say, the Kindred here seem relaxed."

They did at that. Jack took a moment to look around more, and smiled as he started spotting faces. Sitting down was Amanda Pol and her sire Gloria Jennings. Very attractive ladies, wearing some dresses that hugged the body nicely, thin fabric too. In a seat beside them was another woman, not a vampire, and she was holding her wrist out while Gloria indulged. Openly feeding on kine already? The night was young, and if this was any indication, the party was bound to grow into a buffet.

Next to them were Isabella Leauvion and Hella Vendram, along with some of their troupe. While Vendram wore a rather sporty looking suit, it had an impressive amount of skin on display with how the suit jacket was open, she had no shirt or bra underneath, and the only thing keeping the jacket from spreading apart to expose her breasts was a tiny silver chain. Leauvion on the other hand wore a corset, and a lot of leather. Leather gloves, leather boots up to the thigh, and the corset itself created enough cleavage to drown in. All of them were drinking glasses of blood, and chuckling, laughing even.

Garry Tones and his Carthians were mingling; which was a very good thing. The whole Mirrden business had put people on edge, but it wasn't stopping the covenants from interacting. Garry was wearing suit pants, but instead of the open jacket look, he was wearing a shirt, black, that reeked of that dark and handsome vibe the dangerous man liked to put on. Many of his covenant men did the same, suit shirts with power colors and with the first couple buttons undone. Many of them had glasses in their hand, and a couple of the more daring ones even had a thrall or ghoul by their side — also dressed in the half suit ensemble — with wrists out or necks exposed. The female Carthians did as Julias predicted, wearing cocktail party dresses that were both eye catching, and sexy. A lot of backs and stomachs, a lot of cleavage and legs, and more than one woman wore a dress with loose cleavage that let the breasts nearly expose themselves with movement.

None of them held a candle to Antoinette. More and more of the eyes in the room fell on the Prince, staring at her, the amount of skin she was exposing, and they made occasional glances to the little guy beside her. He felt proud, but not because of the huge breasts his girlfriend had. Much as he loved those too, it was how he and the Prince, two people so vastly different, had been in a relationship for so long. He hadn't dared dream that this amazing woman would be in love with him, and he her, and for this relationship to survive. No one else in the city had expected it to either, from the looks he got.

Not exactly the right time to be monologuing the changes of his life in his head. Bad Ventrue habit.

He looked back to the council and the Prince. They were talking about political affairs, and—

“Do not think I am unaware of your interference,” Antoinette said. “You have courage to perform such measures without my permission.”

“Thought it'd be better to ask for forgiveness than permission, my Prince,” Julias said. “We needed to act.”

The Prince made a small, quiet snort, something between a chuckle and a groan. “We will speak of it later, but be content knowing I am not angry over your actions. Upset you did not ask me first, but

I would have agreed nonetheless.” She turned, and smiled down at him. “Jack my love, please feel free to mingle with your companions. Perhaps speak with the Uratha? I must do my rounds.”

The rounds, where the Prince went around and spoke to everyone. No new Kindred since Jack’s embrace, but that didn’t mean the Prince didn’t want to look every single vampire in her city in the eye, to make sure she knew them, and they knew her. And of course, she’d carry the air of a monolithic deity with each conversation, to make sure they all knew who was boss.

How she’d be able to do that, with her breasts nearly hanging out, he couldn’t really fathom. Maybe it was just him, who couldn’t help but be distracted by the large amount of skin her dress was exposing? Her, and a lot of the other women too. Mingling wasn’t going to be easy.

McDonald and Turio bowed and left as the Prince stepped away, but Julias stayed behind, and grinned down at him.

“... yes sire?”

The man laughed. “She’s a beautiful woman.”

Jack caught the man’s grin, and matched it with his own. “The dress is killing me.”

“Completely understandable. I’m still waiting for Triss to show up, and I imagine Jen will be with her.” The two of them fell into step, and started to wander in a slow walk by the tables. Nods were offered to Invictus Kindred they passed, and Jack made sure to catch Amanda’s eye before offering her a small wave. She returned it, the glow of a fresh meal on her skin.

Isabella got up from her table, and Hella followed, holding her hand. Jack never picked up on the relationship vibe from the two of them at work, but now that he’d seen them together in their private home, the clues were a lot more obvious.

“Master Terry, Mister Mire,” Isabella said. Jack had to try hard to not stare at where the corset was pushing her already large breasts into balloons. Could have sat her wine glass on one of them without issue.

Jack offered his most official, Invictus-approved nod of respect. “Madam Leauvion. Enjoying the ball with Madam Vendram?”

The ice woman nodded, subtle grin and all. “We are. Though, I think perhaps no one is enjoying the ball quite as much as your friend the Begotten. Fiona Young, I believe?”

“Fiona’s here?” He stood up on his toes, but even that still kept him below a valuable viewing height.



“She is. A charming young lady, too be sure. Like champagne.” That icy grin melted a bit, and she looked to her lover.

Hella nodded, and made a gesture to a group of people in one of the corners. “Girl is a Begotten? One of those monster things you were talking about? Girl seems as bright and fun as a college chick with too much beer in her.” It was a large group, with hustle and bustle and some rather loud voices of joy. Sounded like something Fiona might cause.

“I think I’ll go say hello, if you don’t mind,” he said. And he waited until Julias, Isabella, and Hella each gave him a nod. Always about respect, showing it, keeping it, and using it as a currency in the Invictus. Once they exchanged with him the currency of the realm, he moved across the room toward the other side where the commotion was.

He looked around some more as he made the trip. So much to take in, so many sounds, so many people, far more people than he’d expected. It was almost cramped. Almost. The room was enormous, big enough to handle a thousand people, and there was at least five hundred within as was, half Kindred and half a mix of thralls, ghouls, and apparently, Begotten and Uratha. More than enough to make his antisocial nature come through, and make him want to leave, go home, maybe browse the internet, play some video games, binge watch something on Netflix, anything to be away from so many shoulders, so many eyes. Didn’t matter how long and how often he found himself dealing with people, he’d never like doing it. It’d always be a mask to wear, being personable and sociable with groups larger than three. And wearing a mask all the time was exhausting.

Before his brain could spiral down into a pit of annoyance, he caught Antoinette’s eye. She’d moved on to talk with Garry, no doubt trying to settle his nerves about the Mirrden expansion. But when their gazes met, she smiled at him, and offered a tiny finger wave, subtle, down by her hip. He didn’t need to enjoy crowds, didn’t need to enjoy socializing, this ‘chew the fat’ dialogue that grated on him so much. When the party was over, he’d be going home with Antoinette, and they could have a conversation where the topic lasted longer than thirty seconds.

Energy restored, he made his way through the crowd.

“... Natasha?”

“M-Mas... Jack. Um... I s-suppose I d-d-don’t need to call you Master Terry.” The beautiful little creature smiled up at him, big smile, a smile he was almost shocked to see on her face. Not because it wasn’t a great smile, but because she was normally so much more subdued. Having two werewolves in her bed must have really agreed with her; and he almost laughed at the thought. It was a good thought, but thinking about it now wasn’t a good idea.

She was beautiful. Natasha Vola was wearing an off-white dress of simple fabric that hugged her body tight, but it went down past her knees, and really accented the little figure she had. Her hair was done up in an interesting ponytail too, with a bun concoction at the top before it cascaded down into a normal ponytail behind her. And, despite Natasha probably not realizing she was doing it, she was nudging her head closer to him, hoping he'd notice the difference.

'Notice anything different?' His mom would say, when she came home from the hairdressers. 'Put on weight?' He'd say, and then get a slap upside the head. The memory tugged at him, and his smile softened as he watched the small woman inch her head toward him.

"Your hair looks really nice."

"Thanks!" she said. She'd be blushing if she had the blush of life going, he could see.

"Ye flirting wi' Tasha right in front of 'er wee jimmies!"

Fiona Fiona. The girl was wearing a royal purple dress, something that hugged the hips, exposed the back, with some loose hanging cleavage to hold her large breasts. Very alluring on the short, curvy creature. What was surprising though was the glass of red she had in her hand; it wasn't blood though. Must have been wine. And it wasn't her first glass.

"Hey Jack."

Oh shit.

Clara came up to stand beside the two girls. She was of an average height, maybe a bit taller, but next to the two tiny girls she seemed quite tall. Dwarfed by the two Uratha behind her, Matthew and Arturo, but still. And the beautiful woman was wearing a dress, black, strapless, something that squeezed her body and emphasized the athletic figure while exposing her strong shoulders. Gold-colored, large earrings contrasted her bare neck, and the tight dress split over one leg above the knee, while the skirt went all the way down to her ankles where she wore rather fancy high heel sandals, black as well.

"... um, hey, Clara. You look great."

She winked at him. She knew she looked great, and from the look in her eye, she liked that he noticed. Antoinette not a hundred feet away, she was playing with fire. Hell, he was playing with fire.

"And 'ere I thought ye vamps would nae have a gid thing to drink!" Fiona took another sip, and then another, before she nudged Clara with her elbow. "Ye sure ye dinnae bring it yerselves?" Alcohol brought out a depth to her accent that had Jack blinking. Hard to understand, but delightful.

“We’re sure.” Clara nodded with her head toward Maria. “Ghost lady apparently knows her drinks... not that I think Fiona here could tell good from bad wine on her best day.”

“Well aren’t ye a bit racist? This cause I’m Scottish?” Again, Fiona nudged her, but the smile on her face refused to break. “But, true. Gettin’ me blootered though, so, I’m happy.” And up the glass went to empty its contents into her mouth. “Yuu! Tall laddie. Gie me another woulds ye?”

“Right away ma’am,” Matt said, and turned to find the waiter or waitress. Sommelier, maybe?

“Ah like him,” Fiona said. “He’s handy.”

“Did Avery come?” Jack said. “I might need to pull some damage control if Jacob’s around.”

Clara reached up and cradled her jaw. “Please do. Would prefer we not have a repeat of last time. That said, she’s not coming.”

Smart of her. A sad situation, but smart of her.

Arturo came up behind Natasha, put his hands on her shoulders, and held the tiny girl against his body. It was cute, seeing the combination of embarrassment and joy on her face as she realized everyone could see her boyfriend holding her. Crossing a social line she was very much not used to; Jack could understand. Antoinette would do the same thing, and he’d immediately get hit with embarrassment, at first. But after a few social events, and getting a blowjob from her in *Bloodlust*, the embarrassment started to fade. It would for her too, he was sure.

“Jessy around?” he said to Natasha. “Surprised she’s not with you.”

“She, um, she’s—oh, over there.”

Sure enough, Jessy was over with the Carthians. Being a bit aggressive maybe, but as far as Jack could tell from a distance, the encounter was a lighthearted one. Jessy had her arm around a man’s shoulders, and was stroking his chest through the shirt of his suit. One of her ghouls probably, and it seemed like the girl was offering the ghoul to some of the Carthians. Upon a second glance, he found one of her other ghouls was actually already sitting down, and had a Kindred behind him, taking a quick sip of his neck.

“That,” Clara said with pointing finger, “is weird. Dolareido is weird. You know how private some Kindred treat the act of feeding? In Tijuana, Kindred never drank unless it was somewhere they felt perfectly safe.”

Jack nodded. It made sense, and he was glad the Kindred situation here was a million times better. “We do feel safe enough here to share. Mostly. Or, maybe, we’re just trying to pretend we do. Lots

happened that left a bad aftertaste in our mouths, and now that it's over and done with, maybe everyone just wants a taste of this openness before it turns sour." Everyone looked at him with furrowed brow. "Shit. If, if it turns sour!"

"J-Jessy, she um, she's... being an amb-b-bassador, sort of, with the Carthians. I guess?"

Seriously? "Is she drunk? ... did she drink someone who was very drunk?"

The Kindred nearby chuckled. Fiona and the werewolves raised a brow in confusion. Probably didn't know Kindred couldn't get drunk, or they just didn't find it funny. Ah well, joke lost.

"P-People seem happy," Natasha said. "So m-m-maybe she sees an opportunity to smooth over some tempers, because of the Mirrden business."

Hopefully. He looked back over to Antoinette, who was moving through to other Kindred. No doubt she'd come over to the Uratha and the sole Begotten eventually, but business first.

"Actually, has anyone seen the sheriff?" he said. "Daniel's been hard to spot as of late, like he's sneaking around all the time or something."

Natasha nodded, pat Art's hands so he'd let her go, and stepped in closer to talk quieter. "D-Daniel is... keeping an eye on things." She wanted to tell him, he could see it in her eyes, but she knew not to. But, that alone was important information, her not telling him the information. Meant that, there was a good chance Daniel was up to something of a sensitive nature, and considering the man's skill set, that meant spying. Course she could have just been misdirecting him, like Julias might have with a client, but he didn't see Natasha doing that to him.

"Now presenting, Alder Jacob, and his subordinates Beatrice, Jennifer, and Othello, of the Circle of the Crone."

Well, damn, that was almost everyone in the Circle in Dolareido. Jack knew of the man Aaron, but had never spoken to him. Beatrice said he was an antisocial type like him, introverted, but preferred books to games; Jack could relate, though.

Everyone turned to watch the four walk down the stairs into the room. And many people's jaws dropped, Jack's included.

Jacob was first, and he was wearing something similar to that time Antoinette held a ball. It was a suit, except the sort of suit you might find on a general in an army a thousand years ago, from the north. It even had leather straps across the chest, with a fur neck lining of some animal, and leather straps that dangled from the waist. It could have been made bulkier, like armor, but it was thin stuff obviously

made for comfort wear, for gatherings like this. The bandage over his eyes almost disappeared in comparison.

Othello was dressed in something similar, but more tribal, brown leather that matched his dark skin, with brighter shades of string that held the old, imposing clothes together. Jack could imagine the man wearing a giant skull for a helmet with that getup. Not comical though, no, far too real and far too on the nose for Jack to simply dismiss it as posing. Othello was a part of the Circle of the Crone, after all. He had a woman with him, a beautiful creature with near ebony skin, a curvy figure, and a flowing, dark red dress.

Much as the two men looked quite intimidating, and even handsome, it was the two female Kindred that had people staring, everyone staring.

Beatrice came down the stairs first, black veil covering her shark mouth. Seeing her with a lot of mascara on was, just like last time, a bit of a shock. But it was the flowing waves of the black dress on her that were so beautiful, contrasting her hard body. And, as she came closer, when she turned, he could see the dress exposed the naked side of her body completely except for where the loops of the hanging fabric curved upward at the ankles. Like liquid night. The silver necklace, and the silver, delicate chains for gloves, were like twinkling stars against the black.

First thing she did was walk toward Julias. And, considering how much people were watching, no doubt Triss knew that she was creating a very movie-like scene by walking up to the big, important Mister Mire, lifting the black veil up where it dangled over her nose, and kissing him.

Jack smiled, and looked back to his friends. “She really does like to show off.”

“Aye, but ah would too if, well, I was Beatrice.” Fiona scooped up Matt’s offered glass, took another sip, and nodded with her head toward the final person to step down the stairs. “Holy hell.”

Beatrice liked to show off, but Jennifer was showing off incarnate. He’d thought what she wore was revealing at the last ball he’d seen at her, at Antoinette’s Black Hall, but now she was wearing nothing but a high hip black thong, and a cloak thing that dangled around her arms in front of her breasts. And, just see-through enough that his eyes locked onto her nipples.

An elbow in the side jolted him to awareness.

“Jack Terry,” Fiona said, “ye nonce! Yer love is right ower there!”

“H-Hey! I am... a man, and I do not have control of my eyes. This is a gender handicap.”

“It’s true,” Matt said. “Just like boners. Got no control over them.”

Art nodded, as if they were just stating the obvious, and Jack motioned to them with his hands as defense against Fiona's glare.

"Bunch ah twats. I cannae believe ye, ye... whoa." She raised a brow as she looked Jen's way again, prompting the rest of them to. They'd missed it at first, considering how easy it was to stare at the ninety-five-percent naked woman, but she had a rope in her hand. The rope, something black, maybe nylon, came out behind her and split into two, and held by the neck two men. The men wore nothing but loincloths, fashioned after Ancient Greece style as far as Jack could tell.

And, as if the woman had broken the dam, more thralls and ghouls started to become more apparent. Like being awoken from a slumber, or maybe, like being told it's ok to walk among the lions. Many got up, and with master to guide them, started to mingle. Others, started to get a little more comfortable with the Kindred they knew, or maybe didn't know. And all of them were drinking wine, a lot of wine.

"Makes me regret never getting drunk," he said.

"Ye ne'er been blootered?"

"Not really. Tipsy a few times? Liquid courage and all that, just doesn't agree with me mentally."

Natasha nodded, and again nodded her head toward Fiona. "F-Fiona's being... a stereotype, on p-p-purpose I think."

"I'm Scottish, nae Irish." The girl gave Natasha a punch in the arm, complete with loss of balance that had her falling until Matt caught her.

Clara, laughing and smiling almost as much as the drunk girl, reached out to grab a glass from a passing sommelier.

"Ok, you vamps may not be able to get drunk, but wolves can. Just takes a lot more than it used to. So my good man, keep em coming." She waved off the sommelier, and downed the glass like it was going to vanish if she didn't. "I'm going to need to get wasted to convince my brain to accept this."

He couldn't blame her. Clara, Arturo, and Matthew may have dripped of strength, confidence, and everything that made them terrifying titans of power, but they looked uncomfortable. Art was holding Natasha halfly because he was probably feeling a little overwhelmed; Jack could see his eyes darting around and taking in everything, analyzing everyone, measuring them up and checking for threats. Understandable. But the man was also glancing around at all the skin, and leather, and chains, and corsets. The men were wearing fancy clothes, but for a ball like this, the women went all out, as Jennifer's display showed.

Jennifer. The girl was basically naked, and Jack had a hell of a time not peeking. Made all the worse as the beautiful woman started to head his way, sway to her hip and ghouls on a leash.

“Jack Terry,” she said, once near. “I have to thank you, for dealing with that creature. Beatrice’s life would have been in danger if not for you. And your Uratha friends.” Grinning, the witch winked at him, and turned to look at the Uratha. “Jennifer, of the Circle of the Crone, as that pompous man at the door announced.”

Wasn’t just him having trouble looking the woman in the eye, everyone was struggling. She really was fucking gorgeous. Jack had to glance at Antoinette a few times, just to remind himself she was real, real and beautiful and awesome and would totally rip his head off if he kept staring at the half naked women all night. She’d said it was ok to look, not ogle. Not his fault! Totally not his fault, like Matt said.

“It was a pretty crazy night,” he said. “I got lucky.”

“Indeed. Oh, this is Hal, and this is Frederick.” She motioned to her two ghouls, and the also nearly naked men offered small bows. “Care for a taste?”

“Aye ah think ah would!” Fiona stumbled toward the two men, before Clara grabbed the tumbling girl by the shoulder and pulled her back.

“You wouldn’t respect yourself in the morning.”

Pouting, Fiona tried to wrestle herself free, but failed, half cause she still had a drink in one hand, half cause she was drunk as fuck by now. But her cheerful smile returned a second later, and she leaned on Clara as the alcohol took her on a journey.

“Ye’re strong.”

“Comes with the territory.”

Jack smiled at Fiona. Maybe she did like playing up a stereotype a bit, being surrounded by strangers. She was still fun, and they needed fun. “I’m not sure people will be too willing to share,” he said. “I mean, maybe a little, but—”

“Holy shit, this is pretty sweet.” Jessy hopped on over, a bounce and sway to her step that would have convinced Jack she was also drunk, if she was kine. But, now that she was closer, he could see the color of her skin; girl was blushing life, or had freshly fed on a large meal. And, to fit the theme of the night, her dress was a loose, silk dress hanging from tiny straps down to her thigh, ocean blue, and did nothing to disguise how hard her nipples were.

“I understand that your ghouls are already sharing themselves, Jessy Herrington,” Jen said, and she gestured to the other side of the grand room, where more Kindred were gathering, as well as more of the ghouls and thralls. Indeed, people were tasting. Some of the Kindred comfortable with each other were Kissing the same prey, at the same time. More than one of the kine looked both exhausted, and pleased. Very pleased.

He really pitied the Uratha men. He could smell the arousal coming off of them, hell he could smell it coming off of Clara as well. Being surrounded by so much skin, just like Bloodlust, was bound to make anyone alive aroused. Only difference was the lack of people fucking in the corners, and he was sure that'd change once the party was over and people went their separate ways.

Jessy and Jennifer, two very dangerous women, both very confident in themselves, very over the top, and without the foundation to back it up. Antoinette could back it up, Antoinette could walk the walk, talk the talk, et cetera, but these two? Well, they were stronger than him at least, and that was enough reason for him to be careful.

Or were they? Maybe Jessy was stronger than him, but Jennifer? The beast in his gut was telling him a different story. The posture, the glances from her eyes, the way she positioned herself when looking at him, and the way he did her. The unspoken language of the beast extended beyond body language as well, invisible auras only the animal inside could feel or understand. And it was telling him this Kindred a decade older than him was not his superior.

And as he glanced around, he took note of the other Kindred, the ones of similar age to Jennifer, a bit older, a bit younger. To varying degrees, he could feel it in his gut that many of them that should have been stronger than him, weren't. And those he thought were of similar strength to him, weren't. It was by no means a clear science, understanding the hidden language of the beast, but still.

He could feel the Ventrue ego in him swell. Julias was right, he was strong for one as young as he, the youngest of all the Kindred in Dolareido, and the others knew it too. Would other Ventrue his age have been able to communicate with two crows as easily as he, and have them perching outside to monitor the ball? Maybe. Maybe not.

Careful, Jack. Julias has warned you a million times about Ventrue and hubris. So instead of becoming the next Greek tragedy, don't overstate yourself, and don't invite trouble. Also, get out of your head and socialize, for fuck's sake.

“How did it go with the Carthians, Jessy?”



“Eh, they’re kind of pissy, as expected. But it’s nothing too bad. Not like anyone’s been hurt or anything, too much anyway, it’s just a bit of territory. So I brought the boys as a bit of an olive branch, ya know?”

The group looked past her to the Carthians. Well, not just Carthians anymore really. Some of the Invictus were there, and so was Othello. And, it looked like it was getting a bit intense. Jessy’s ghouls had their shirts completely open, and various Kindred were taking small nibbles of them. Othello’s ghoul — if she was a ghoul, hard to tell without getting closer — was sitting down, and Othello was taking a quick sip of her while a couple other Kindred took their own as well, from the wrists and neck. The wounds always healed of course, as each vampire licked the bite marks to close the puncture marks. Some vampires took licking a little far, and got their hands involved, squeezing and groping gently.

“I um... you ok with that?” Natasha said, and she reached out to poke Jessy in the side. “I suppose so.”

“Course I’m ok with it. They’re my ghouls, not my lovers.”

Jack shrugged, and motioned with his hand to some of the Daeva out in the crowd. “Daeva might disagree. And, I think it could be kind of sweet, a vampire falling in love with their ghoul. Bit of a Gothic vibe too, right?”

Jessy and Jennifer looked at him like he was nuts, but Natasha nodded, as did Fiona, nearly falling over in the process. The werewolves on the other hand, were too busy looking around at the feast that had begun. The three of them were obviously having trouble not staring at the half-naked woman in front of them, but the sound of moans and the trickling of blood down people’s chests and breasts drew their eyes eventually. So wasteful, spilling blood like that, so decadent, so utterly fitting the extravagance of the party.

“Don’t suppose you three fancy sharing some of your blood?” Jennifer said, and she stepped in a little closer toward Matt. “I can only imagine how a werewolf tastes.”

“N-No!” Natasha flailed one of her hands a bit, and reached out for Matthew to pull him closer. Painfully adorable, and Jack couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight of the tiny woman pulling the big man behind her. Such a little thing, hogging two massive beasts.

“Relax, Natasha Vola, I’d never force. I’m only asking. And besides, there’s Clara here. And I hear a wolf named Mason has been enjoying the touch of a Kindred. Perhaps he’ll share?”

Clara didn't look convinced. "Mason's been having it kind of rough since Stephanie died. I'd give him his space. Besides, this girl he's been seeing has been good for him, and I wouldn't want to ruin that. But, David's single, if you don't mind putting up with a little crazy."

The four Kindred raised a brow. "Crazy?" they said.

"Mhmm. He's Ithaeur. And... and none of you know what that means. He's a bit more exposed to the spirit side, so he sees or hears some weird shit sometimes. Bit young though."

Jennifer raised a brow, and stroked her chin thoughtfully. "I—"

"Now presenting, sheriff to the Prince of Dolareido, Daniel Smith, and companion Athalia."

Wait, what?

Everyone in the party had the same look on their face, and the whole room turned to see the sheriff walking down the stairs, with a woman on his arm. Daniel was dressed in something close to a tuxedo, if perhaps a bit more plain; typical of the man, as Antoinette was no doubt thinking. What wasn't typical was the beautiful woman on his arm, Athalia. Maybe she wasn't always mean? His one encounter with her had been a pretty poor first impression, and maybe it was accurate, but she didn't look mean as she walked down the stairs, and faced the crowd.

Ok, maybe a little mean.

Dark skin contrasted beautifully against the blue dress, and like most of the other women, it was quite form fitting, with plunging cleavage, sleeves, and a long skirt that split on the hip. Her hair was loose, but it had something done to it, something that made it more wavy than he remembered when he saw her in the tunnels. Her face looked soft, at odds with her somewhat tall, thin frame, and practically on the wrong body compared to her steel gaze. Scary eyes. Scary woman.

He knew she was a Begotten, everyone knew, and everyone could feel it as the ancient vampire escorted the lovely woman down to join them. Like Fiona, but not. From Fiona, everyone could feel a strange aura of power, and of a duality from her of something grand and hidden in the dark. From Athalia though, if there was a duality, he couldn't sense it, as if this woman was far closer, far more in tune with the horror inside her. Far more at home.

"I didn't think she'd come," he said.

"Aye, but ah convinced her. An' Beatrice told me the lass has a history wi' the sheriff, so ah went askin'." Fiona shrugged, took another sip, and walked over to Jack to lean against him.

"Wait, you just asked? Who'd you ask?"

“Th’ Prince o’ course.”

“... how did you arrange that?”

“Arrange?” She shrugged again, and poked him in the shoulder. “I’m friends wi’ her lover! Ah walked in th’ front door, and asked to see ‘er. Ah can be very convincin’... and that jimmy behind th’ counter isn’t exactly th’ smartest man.”

Yeah, Chunk wasn’t. Not sure why Antoinette kept him around.

The Prince got a parting nod to the latest Kindred she was speaking with — some of the younger Carthians — and moved over to stand with her friend Daniel Smith. Fake last name if Jack had ever heard one. Athalia stood her ground, and looked the extremely tall woman up and down a few times with a raised brow. Probably wasn’t expecting so much skin.

After a few words, the Prince raised a hand, and motioned for Jack to come closer. He nodded, smiled, but didn’t move at first. Took a moment to get his legs going, and walk over. Athalia was not a woman he liked, and judging from the small sneer she showed him as he approached, she didn’t like him either. Seemed she didn’t like vampires in general, which made her arrival very strange.

“My love, I believe you have already met Athalia.” Antoinette reached out for him, and slipped her arm around his shoulders once he was in close. He was short enough to fit snug against her side, and, as he got in close, he could feel the Prince’s hug tightening. Protective.

“Jack Terry,” the monster said. “It’s good to see you survived.”

“Y-Yeah, thanks.” The most disingenuous ‘happy you’re alive’ he’d ever heard. Not that you hear that line very often, but the annoyance on the girl’s face was only thinly veiled. His presence bothered her. Antoinette’s presence bothered her. How the fuck did Daniel convince her to come? Why did he? Was that actually what happened? Mental note: ask Natasha later.

Daniel’s face was blank, and he adjusted his glasses with a finger against the bridge. “Sorry I wasn’t there to help.” Daniel, talking to him. This was rare.

“We did go down there without permission,” he said. “Maybe not the brightest move on our part.”

“You saved my new subordinate from an uncertain fate, my love.” Again, Antoinette hugged him to her side, tighter than usual. Something about Athalia was putting her on edge, cause it wasn’t jealousy he saw on the Prince’s face, it was worry. Subtle, just a single line, a tiny crease on her brow. If her attitude toward Athalia was any indication, no wonder she wasn’t excited to have Fiona enter her

city. Big of Antoinette to help Fiona with this whole situation then; at least, if Athalia had actually wanted to come.

“I do owe you a favor,” Daniel said. “You and your friends, for risking that to save Natasha.”

Jack’s smile forced its way onto his face. “Well, I mean, we wanted to prove Fiona was innocent too.”

A quiet grumble caught his ear, and he looked to Athalia. Woman was looking toward the werewolves and vampires grouping in the back, and Jack could tell she was trying hard to cover a scowl.

What was up with this woman? Exact opposite of Fiona. The redhead was bubbling with happiness and couldn’t wait to socialize with other ‘monsters’ like Kindred or Uratha. Athalia was mean. Not even, mean wasn’t a good enough word. Hateful, like she genuinely hated them for no reason. And Daniel wasn’t exempt. Poor guy looked utterly unphased by the girl’s rudeness, but Jack could see Athalia wasn’t too happy about having him on her arm.

“... sorry,” she said, once she caught Jack’s eyes. Shit, he must have been showing his own annoyance.

“W-What? No, um, it’s ok. Just... you don’t really look like you want to be here.”

Antoinette brought over her other hand, and gave him a small flick on the nose. “Jack, do not insult the guests.”

“He’s right.” Shrugging, Athalia gestured to the room. “Only reason I’m here is because Daniel says it’ll do some good, for Begotten relations. Azamel agreed.”

Don’t ask her why she hates vampires, don’t ask her why she hates vampires. Control your tongue before you lose it.

“I am sure it will.” Antoinette mimicked her gesture, catching Jacob and Othello in the wake of her hand. “And, please, understand that the Invictus did what they did only in pursuit of maintaining peace.”

“Yes. I’m sure.” Another scowl from the monster, but not as cruel as the others at least. “Know that Azamel, angry as all hell, will continue to do what she was doing, as she was doing it. Quietly, without intent to interfere.”

“Then I am pleased,” Antoinette lied. “It is best for everyone that we get along.”

If there was anyone in the room who couldn't do politics, he'd thought it'd be Jessy. But this Athalia woman looked like she was ready to start arguing the moment someone said something she disagreed with. Kindred learned to dance around the truth, lie, manipulate, but, this girl was probably honest to a fault. He could appreciate that. And, she had said sorry, about the scowling.

“Jack,” Athalia said. “May I speak to you in private?”

God damn it.