

The door opened, and a bull in a sharp suit entered.

"Ah, Jerry," Damian said, "You have an update?"

Jerry handed the tiger a file, before sitting down. "Yes, sir."

Damian looked through the list of names, making sure the one that interested him was in there. "Well?" When he did, he closed the file, and set it on his desk.

"The managerial reorganization is proceeding well. We've identified those who have just done the bare minimum to keep their job, and we're now looking for the best position to promote them to, to ensure they will fail miserably, and will either quit, or we'll be able to fire them."

"Good. How about the employee restructuring?"

"We should be starting that in a few weeks, a month at most. We want the management situation stable before we inform the employees of the take over." Jerry paused, seeming to collect his thoughts. "Sir? Why are we doing this?"

"It's good factory. With a few upgrades, we should be able to increase productivity. People will always need mattresses, Jerry."

"Yes, Sir, I know that. I mean the company paid employee training. That's going to cost us millions, and all it's going to do is let them get paid not to work. I can guarantee that none of them are going to bother learning anything."

"Really Jerry? So, tell me. Why do you think all those people are poor, and stuck working a dead end job?"

Jerry started talking, Damian listened, but didn't pay attention. *He has bags under his eyes. He hasn't been sleeping well, his shirt buttons are straining, and his belt is one notch too tight. He isn't exercising enough for what he eats, but he isn't willing to admit it. He's fiddling with his wedding band. He's been married for twenty years, so it isn't because he isn't used to it. He isn't turning it, he's moving it back and forth. It's a reminder of something bad. Subconsciously, he wants to take it off, but he won't let himself do it. He's having trouble with his wife, it's serious, but he is considering toughing it through.*

"So, if I understand," Damian said, once Jerry was done, "you feel they are where they are, because they don't work hard enough, they are lazy, basically." Jerry nodded. "I see, so tell me, if you're marriage were to fail."

"What does my marriage have to do with this?" Jerry asked, forcefully. *He's getting flustered, he sees my comment as an attack.* Damian waved a hand. "I'm just using that as an example." He paused. "You're married?"

Jerry nodded. *There, he's calm again. He believes I didn't know, so meant nothing with it.* Even a small manipulation like that sent a slight thrill through him. Which only served to remind him it had be a long time since he had really let loose on someone. Maybe he could get one of his nephews to volunteer?

"So, if it were to fail, would it be entirely because you didn't try hard enough? Isn't possible that outside forces might be involved?"

Jerry nodded, reluctantly.

"Then, can't you accept that it's entirely possible these people," he tapped the folder, "might be trying as hard as they can, but just have the deck stacked against them? Look, Jerry. I want to do this, because educated employees are much more productive than uneducated ones. Yes, I'm certain some of them will just see that as a paid vacation, but those will weed themselves out by themselves. We're going to be left with people who can do the job better, even if they don't manage to learn the skills needed to climb the corporate ladder, they will be able to improve how the work gets done, which will make the factory more productive. This will help them, and it will help us, you'll see."

"Yes sir," Jerry said, standing, and heading you. He wasn't fully convinced, but that didn't bother Damian, Jerry did what he was told, to the best of his abilities, no matter his personal belief.

Of course, that had been total bullshit. Something he'd come up on the moment, a good sound bite, if a long one. He'd have to condense it, and have it printed, to help moral, and reassure them they weren't going to lose their job in this. No, the fact that all those people were going to get an education out of this, a better life, was completely irrelevant. He only cared about one of them. And he didn't actually care about her. He only cared because of her relationship to his nephew.

He hadn't lied to Patrick, when he'd told him his mother would spit on anything he gave her. So he wasn't going to give her anything, he was simply going to lay door after door before her, and she'd have to open them herself.

He looked at the picture on his desk, the only picture there. Except for the family picture, they were the only ones he had. It's was of him, at five yours old, sitting on his father's lap, both of them were waving at the camera. He hadn't perfected how to smile then, so it looked fake.

"You know, father, there are days, when I regret you made me promise to look after our family."

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It had been on his father's death bed. He'd been rushed to the hospital, after being crushed by a car, when the lift broke. Everyone was there, they had operated on him, and done the best they could, there would be other operations, but at that point, they wanted him to rest. No one could see him for a few hours.

Damian wouldn't have any of that. He was going to see his father, and they weren't going to stop him. He talked to the head nurse, a large gorilla, who had been posted in front of the door, because Damian wasn't the only one who had tried to get in his father's room. Damian talked in a low voice, to ensure no

one else heard what he told the gorilla. Within two minutes of listening, the nurse started shedding fur in fear. A minute later, his eyes were wide, the pupil dilated, and his black fur seemed to get pale. Thirty seconds later, he opened the door to let Damian in.

It wasn't that he loved his father, he didn't. But this man was the only person to look at him without any fear. His brothers love him, he knew that, but they were also afraid of him. He didn't hold that against them, they were right to be afraid. But this man didn't. His eyes had held concern, and worry at times, but never fear, and that made him special to Damian.

"Hey dad," he said, softly, sitting. He called him dad, because his father preferred that, it made him feel that Damian cared, even if he knew he didn't.

"Damian," his father croaked, his voice weak and raw. "How bad?"

Damian looked his father over. Both legs were broken, one arm crushed, one broken. One lung was punctured, his spine broken in three places, a lot of internal damage. His father's breathing was still labored, even after the operation, the machines he was connected to didn't tell an encouraging story.

"It looks very bad, dad."

"I'm not making it, am I?"

"I don't think so, dad." Was this one of those cases, where he should have lied? Possibly, but he and his father had made a pack, a long time ago, they would never lie to each other, no matter what.

His father nodded weakly.

"Damian, promise me something. Promise you'll look after our family."

"I will, dad."

"Promise me." His father insisted. Damian had hoped to avoid that. When he promised something, he stuck to it, no matter what, so he did his best to avoid making promises. His father knew that.

"I promise, dad."

"And try not to hurt too many people."

"I'll try." At least that hadn't been a promise. He had already promised not to hurt his brothers, as well as to only hurt people who deserved it. Another limitation would have been troublesome.

"I think I'm going to sleep now."

"Alright dad." Damian turned to leave, then stopped. He kissed his father on the forehead, thinking that would be an appropriate gesture for the situation.

His brothers asked him how he was, and Damian just shrugged. He'd never promise them the truth, and he knew they would be more comfortable believing there was hope.

He sat in the first seat he found, and started thinking. If

he was going to take care of the family, he was going to have to change his plans. The security company he bought had only been something to keep him busy, keep his mind occupied. He'd never intended to make anything of it, but now, now he would have to expand, diversify, he'd need more money, more power, to accomplish what his father had asked of him.

Damian thought, and through his thinking he was aware of a code blue in his father's room, the worry his brother's expressed, the relief, the arguments, and the blame. He didn't participate, busy with his thoughts. It would have to be a multinational, he couldn't do what needed to be done on a local level, he was going to have to be able to affect the entire world.

At some point, there was another code blue, doctors rushed in, worked on his father for a time, and then left. His brothers and uncles went in the room, and he looked up. He had been thinking for twelve hours. He went to the room's door and looked in.

Dominic looked at him, crying. "He's gone." Was all he said.

Damian nodded, and left. What people might think of him, he didn't care. He never had. They probably thought he was overwhelmed by the death of his father, and couldn't tolerate being here anymore. He didn't care that his father was dead, and he was leaving because he had work to do.

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"But I have to admit, you gave me quite the wonderful challenge."

"Mister Orr?" his secretary asked over the intercom. "You're three O'clock is here."

"Thank you Alice, send Mister Hammer in."

Damian sat back in his seat. "So," he asked the fox, as he took the seat on the other side of his desk, "what do you want to cover in this session." He smiled at his biographer and prepared himself for an entertaining two hours.

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Patrick got out of the bathroom, showered and dressed. It was just a little past noon.

"Hey mom," he said, stopping by the living room.

"Hi Patrick, what time did you come in last night?"

"Around four am. There was a private party at the bar, and Bruce asked me to stick around. Make sure they didn't get too rowdy."

She turned from her chair, to look at him. "You know I don't like it when you work that late."

"I know mom, but he paid me overtime, and we need the money, I wasn't going to turn it down. I put it in your checkbook."

"Not all of it, I hope."

"Nah, I kept thirty bucks, that's going to see me through

the day."

Damian had been right.

His mother had been ecstatic when he'd show up, she'd been worried sick about him. She didn't scowl him or anything. But things weren't alright. After that, they didn't talk for the next two days. She'd be gone to work by the time he got up, and in bed by the time he came back. He just had to make sure to be out of the house before she came back from work.

They reached a compromise a few days after that, they weren't going to talk about what had happened. Patrick wanted to bring it up, but he knew he wouldn't be able to stay calm, and he really didn't want to be angry at his mother again. So he didn't bring it up, and tried to figure things out on his own.

After three weeks, he had decided he needed to talk to someone.

"I'm going to head out, Mom. There's a few things I want to take care of this afternoon."

"Okay, honey. Oh, I won't be here for dinner, so just make yourself something."

"You don't have to do overtime, mom. If we need more money, I can find something else. Joey, at the scrap yard is always willing to let me help out."

"No, it isn't that. There's a meeting at the factory, after my shift. Seems we were bought out, and they're going to explain how the transition is going to happen."

"Are you going to lose you job?" He really hoped not. His mom wasn't overly skilled, she'd had to take care of him, instead of getting an education, so if she lost her factory job, she'd only have the waitressing one, until she found something new, and in this economy, that wasn't going to be easy. Maybe he should talk to Joey about working there for a few hours every day. It wouldn't be much, but anything would help if she went down to one job.

"No, no. I'm sure everything is going to be alright. They seem like really nice people."

Patrick wished he could be as optimistic her, but you didn't often hear about buyouts going well for the employees. Something caught his attention on the muted television. "Can you turn up the volume?"

Margarette looked at the TV, and raised the volume. The police commissioner was standing at a podium, putting some of her papers in order. In the bottom right corner there was a 'live' icon slowly flashing. She was a gazelle, in a sharp looking deep blue suit.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I called this press conference because today, we are celebrating a major victory against gang violence."

Text scrolled along the bottom of the screen. 'Leaders and lieutenants of Sarato, The Claws, and Infernals, arrested, gangs in disarray.'

"Over the last few months, we have been conducting a series of under cover operations, we have been infiltrating multiple gangs, and this morning, proceeded to arrest the leaders of the Sarato, The Claws, and the Infernals. With them, we also arrested all their lieutenants, as well as most of their gang members.

"When I became commissioner, I promised the citizen of San Francisco I would address the city's gang problem, this is only the start. This was possible in large part due to the citizens of this fine city, who donated their money so we could afford to properly fund the gang task force, and who remained vigilant, informing us of what they were up to. If we are going to call this a war on gangs, we need to all be in it together.

"Know that the police isn't going to rest, this is only the beginning. Gangs are parasite on this city, it's time to get rid of them."

Patrick was stunned. It couldn't be a coincidence, Damian had actually kept his word. He'd said that Patrick wouldn't have to fear for his safety anymore. That hadn't stopped him from constantly looking over his shoulder when he was moving about neighborhood. It was true that he hadn't been bothered once in these last three weeks, when before that, if he went two days without being harassed, or threatened, by someone from the Saratos, he considered that a miracle.

But he hadn't actually believed he was ever going to be safe from them. Not after beating up one of their lieutenants, when he tried to force him to join them. Patrick didn't want to have anything to do with the gangs, unfortunately, his refusal, meant that for the last five years he'd had to fight them off regularly.

Could he really be free of them now?

He turned, to head to the kitchen, and looked at the picture on the table in the small entryway, of his mother and 'father'. He'd grown up dreaming of having a father in his life. Of what it would be like for the two of them to play catch in the front yard, teaching him to drive. He'd wondered what kind of man he had been, other than a war hero. Would he have been kind, would he have loved him, even with the way he was?

He wondered why she hadn't taken the pictures down, now that the truth was out. Was she trying to deny it? Or maybe it was just that she had grown use to the idea of the family they represented. They family she dreamed she had? He didn't have to imagine anymore. He had a father, well, two. That was going to get really confusing at times. He just hoped he could ever be comfortable around them, even if they were . . . What they were.

He put the picture down, and made himself a sandwich, said good bye, and headed out, eating while he walked. The place he wanted to go to was a ways away.

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He entered the small church, and as always, he felt a

little smaller, standing in the house of God. He dipped his fingers in the basin of holy water, and crossed himself, and then walked between the pews.

The church was empty, it being in the middle of the afternoon, on a Tuesday, Patrick wasn't surprised. He was a little relieved, actually. He wasn't sure how comfortable he would have been in this unknown church if it had been crowded with its regular parishioners.

He sat on one of the pews, and looked at the cross, where Jesus was crucified. Like every depictions of him, his antlers had been broken off at the base and made into a crown, all the points pressing in his head.

He looked down and noticed someone left a bible in the nook on the pew in front of him. He took it, and leafed through the pages for a moment. He looked back up. "God," he whispered, "Why did you make me this way?"

Someone put a hand on his shoulder, and said "Can I help you?"

Patrick jumped out of his fur. He landed a couple of feet away, and turn, panting in fright. He was looking at an otter, in a cassock, and she was also panting, a hand on her heart. It seemed that his start, had frightened her as much as she had him.

"I'm sorry," he said, when he found his voice again.

"It's alright, I should have made sure you were aware I was here. I'm Mother Rosetta. I don't remember seeing you here before." She sat on the pew.

"I'm Patrick." He sat, a respectable distance away. "I'm not in your parish. I live in the brownstone district."

"That isn't exactly close by, what brought you to our church?"

Patrick hesitated a moment. "I wanted a different point of view. I read a couple of the blogs on your site, and they were, refreshingly balanced." She tilted an ear toward him. "Father Durony, the priest at my church, he's . . . very old fashion."

"I take it he's older," she said, with a knowing smile. He nodded. "Yes, they do tend to view God was being brimstone and fire, while I see Him as embodying love. Now, why don't you tell me what the problem is?"

"I'm . . ." He froze. He couldn't say it. He'd been practicing saying for the last few days, and yet, he couldn't manage to get the word out.

"You don't have to say it, if you aren't comfortable," She comforted.

He breathed, to calm his nerve. "No, I have to say it. Not saying it makes it feel like it's easier to ignore." Worry crossed her face. Patrick closed his eyes, took a few breaths. "I am gay." There's he'd said it . . . and nothing. No being struck down, no bursting into flame. He opened his eyes in surprise. She was smiling at him.

"I take it you were expecting something to happen?"

"I know it's stupid, but yes, I was. It isn't like God has turned anyone into a pillar of salt recently."

She chuckled. "I take it, you are having difficulties coming to term with your sexuality?"

"Yeah. Ever since I've been a kid, I've been told how being gay's a sin, how God hates gays, that they are the work of the devil, stuff like that. If being gay is so wrong, why did he make me that way?"

She looked at him for a moment. "God doesn't hate gays."

"But the bibles says it's wrong." He shook the bible he was holding in her direction.

"The bible was written by people, not by God."

"But they wrote the words of God, didn't they?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Lets say, for a moment, that those who wrote the bible were indeed, lets call it, channeling God. Lets say that's true. Do you think that one of our minds could hold the mind of God, and not miss something, or get something wrong? God's mind is infinite, he knows everything, and sees everything. Our minds are very much limited. Even if we were to try to hold all that God is, we couldn't, at best, we could only hold a very small part of it. And if his mind is anything like ours, it's probably a pretty chaotic place, so it stands to reason the writing of those people wouldn't be complete, or maybe not even correct."

"So, you're saying that the bible isn't entirely accurate, because we couldn't understand everything God might have meant."

She smiled at him. "No, that's not what I'm saying. That is something someone could argue. I personally don't believe the bible is the word of God."

Patrick stared at her.

"Shocking, I know," she grinned. "Think about it, we know the bible has been modified at least once, and almost certainly multiple times, to fit the views of the rulers of the time. No, I'm not saying there aren't some good ideas in it, but in the end, I am not willing to believe that God would have a hand in penning something with so much hate and anger in it. God doesn't hate you, he doesn't hate anyone."

"How about his enemies?"

"God doesn't have enemies."

"Of course he does. All those jihadists and terrorists?"

"They aren't God's enemies. God made them, he made all of us, how could they be his enemies?"

"But they follow other gods."

"No, they don't. At least, I don't believe they do. They might have given God a different name, but there is only one God, not just one True God, simply one God."

"Then why are they attacking us?"

"Because they're people, they aren't perfect. For what ever reason they decided to, they are using God as an excuse to make

war, instead of following God to peace."

Patrick had to think about that one. It was true enough, he'd seen a lot of people proclaim God's name, when doing something that God would never approve of.

"Then what about God's first creations? He had to hate them for disobeying him, he destroy them, after all."

"Did he? The bible simply says that he removed man from Eden, for eating the apple. I prefer to think that he took them somewhere else. Maybe to a world of their own, where they could learn the consequences of their acts. After all, when we asked permission to eat the apple, he warned us we would have to leave. That once we would have the knowledge the fruit brought, Eden wouldn't be for us anymore."

Patrick leaned back in the pew.

"After man was removed for Eden," she recited, "God elevated us, the animals, to take his place, to care for eden."

"Except the snake," Patrick added, absentmindedly.

Mother Rosetta smiled. "Yes, except for the snake. Because of the part he played in offering the Apple to man, he has been fated to always crawl on the ground as a simple beast. But for the rest of us, we grew, we cared for Eden, until the day our curiosity grew too strong, so we asked to taste the apple, and we left Eden."

"Do you think we'll ever make it back there?"

"I don't know. God seems to want us to. That's why he sent his son to us, to show us the path to follow to make it back. Did you ever think about why Jesus came to us as a cervid, instead of, say, a lion, or a tiger?"

"No, I never thought about it."

"I believe it was so we would see that power or strength wasn't what would get us back to Eden. Cervids aren't exactly known to be strong, although they certainly aren't the weakest of us. He wanted us to see that it would be our actions that would lead us back to Eden."

Patrick looked at the bible he was holding, and rubbed the cover. "If I can't use the bible to figure out what's right and what's wrong, what do I have to find my way to Eden? How am I suppose to do it?"

"God gave you the tool you need to find your way back." She reached over and put a hand on his chest. "He gave you a heart. He gave you the ability to feel, to care, and to love. If you follow your heart, if you are nice to your neighbor, you will eventually find your way back."

Patrick let out a short sardonic chuckle. "I hate to break it to you Mother, but nice doesn't exactly cut it in this world."

"You're right. When I say nice, I don't mean you should just lay down and let other trample you. God wants you to defend yourself, he wants you to defend others, if needed be, but do so without malice. Don't seek revenge, seek justice. Keep anger out

of the fight."

"That might be easier said than done," Patrick commented. She tilted her head. "I have some anger issues."

"How bad is it? Have you felt like you wanted to hurt someone?"

"No, nothing that bad, I mostly just scream a lot."

"When was the last time?"

"A few weeks ago, I found out something pretty big, and it wasn't easy to deal with."

"What was it?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not ready to talk about that yet."

"I understand. When you are, you know where to find me. I'm just what, a five hour's walk away?"

Patrick chuckled, "It was just three."

She looked at him. "Just three, he says, like that's an easy walk."

"I like to walk," he replied.

"Tell you what." She pulled a pen, and wrote a number on a paper. "Here's my cell number. If you ever need to talk, call me, day or night."

"Thank you," he said, taking the paper.

"Will you be staying? I give a mass in about an hour."

Patrick checked his watch. "I can't. I have to work tonight, and with the walk, I'll be there just in time."

"Alright, you are always welcome here." She stood. "Have a good day, and God bless you."

"Thank you Mother." Patrick left the pew, stood, looking at Jesus, crossed himself and turned to leave. He stopped by the entrance, next to the donation box. He didn't normally give anything, he had so little already, but he dug in his pocket and pulled out a ten and a twenty.

He wouldn't be able to go home, so he'd have to buy something to eat on the way. He looked at the money. Ten buck wasn't going to get him much, but he could manage. He put he twenty in the box. He'd grab a sandwich and a soda on the way. If he got the munchies during work, he could snack on the peanuts.