

In retrospect, I think that that night – a Tuesday – was one of the best I had for years. Even now, after everything else that’s happened, I still think back to that night and just how stupid happy we both were. Considering all the bullshit that started the next day, it was probably for the best.

“See, I hate playing Mr. Gamenwatch,” Jackie bitched, squashed between my side and the arm of the couch, frantically punching buttons. “What’s he got, huh? Bacon. You have what, a sword? I have bacon.”

I leaned into her. It’s the only way to play video games: don’t knock it if you haven’t tried it. Leaning helps. Kicking helps. Waving your arms wildly and screaming helps. I know: I’ve tested it. Scientific method, baby.

“You just don’t know how to play him,” I explained to her, real patient. And for that, she punched me.

“Oh, fuck you, like *you do!*”

“I do.”

“Yeah?” I probably should have seen it coming, but I didn’t, and she snatched my controller out of my hands before I could react. Seconds later, she shoved her own controller back at me.

“Prove it.”

Well, shit. She called my bluff on that one: I had no idea how to play anyone but Pit. “Easiest thing I ever proved,” I said.

It took twenty minutes for her to prove me wrong, and to be honest I was pleasantly surprised I lasted that long. Of course, it was twenty minutes of gloating, which was pretty intolerable, but then again it was Jackie, and I didn’t really mind. It was just background noise, comfortable and soothing, as long as she was curled in next to me.

Kiss her. It would be the right moment, I thought, after the game finished, and she dropped her controller on the floor, with a declaration of “You’re such a liar, Patton.”

I didn’t kiss her. Hindsight’s 20/20, and when I thought back on it, that was really stupid. I should have kissed her. Instead, I said “King’s gonna put me in charge of his bar on Cash.”

That got her attention away from whatever she was doing with the couch cushions – picking at ‘em, probably. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

Her eyes narrowed. “He’s up to something. He’s gonna have you killed.”

“Jax!” I scoffed. “Please. That doesn’t make any damn sense: why would you put someone in charge of a business you own and then have ‘em killed?” I pulled her closer, left my arms wrapped around her tiny shoulders. “He said it’s a gift for graduatin’ from college. Got my business degree now, makes sense that I have a business, yeah?”

“For him to run his scams out of, sure. Or to pay up your life insurance as your employer, and then collect on it when you *die*.”

“Why can’t you just accept the man’s doing something nice?” I slumped back across the cushions, pulling her with me, until we settled that way, chest-to-chest. I beamed, she scowled. “C’mon, Jax, he practically *raised* me; he’s like my father. That’s what dads do, right?”

She just glared more. Oh, right.

“Allegedly,” I added. “Anyway!” I squeezed her. “If you’re gonna stick with me, you better warm up to him. I’m his first in command.”

She prodded me in the chest, a little viciously in my opinion. Girl has pointy fingers, even now. “And *that’s* weird too. Doesn’t he have a kid our age?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “So what? Mike’s never taken to the crime game; he’s too cruel. Just hurts people to hurt ‘em.” I tapped her on the forehead. “You gotta be like us, see? Smart. Why hurt someone when you can extort ‘em instead, right?”

“But doesn’t it *worry* you that Mike always seems, I dunno, pissed off? At you?”

“Why would it? His dad keeps him happy, don’t worry about it.”

“Plus, that King hates *me*.”

“He doesn’t hate you.” That was another lie. He did hate her. He hated her because she could get places his men couldn’t, not because she was a girl and she strutted in there with her assets on display – she didn’t really have the figure for that – but because she was sly and sneaky and small enough to use air vents, when push came to shove. He hated her because she’d managed to slip all the money out of a safe in the back of one of his bars. And he hated her – he told me, one night – “because a boy like you got potential, Patton, and for you to throw it away on some sneak thief bitch would be a fucking shame”.

“Does too.”

“He’ll warm up to you. He just doesn’t see your better aspects.” She squeaked when I grabbed her and rolled us both onto our sides, the bony points of her hips settled into mine. I swept my

arm toward the picture window in my apartment. “That’ll be ours. We’ll show ‘im, Jax. Best team ever, mark my words. With my looks and your brains –”

“We’re sunk.”

“Fine, your looks and my brains –”

“Even worse.”

I prodded her in the side, so that she’d giggle and squirm. “Stop interrupting me.”

“Just pointing out the flaws in your plan.”

“Flaws? In *my* plans?” I loved the way my chin fit in the nape of her neck, just perfect, her chopped-up hair tickling my face. “You fool, there are never flaws in my plans.” She made a skeptical noise at that. “I’m telling you: you can help me with the bar. Run the house, or play the piano, or whatever, and we’ll both coordinate King’s business through the underground. He’ll warm right up to you.”

“You think?”

“Course.” I wasn’t anywhere near as confident as I sounded, I guess, but it made sense at the time. I mean, that’s all I’d done to get King’s attention: be decent at what he wanted me to do. And Jackie was – is – pretty smart, she’d pick right up on whatever we were supposed to be doing for him in that stupid bar’s underground. I was sure of that.

I was probably right too, not that I ever got the chance to find out.

Remember how earlier I said hindsight’s 20/20? Well, I had a long time to think about that night. What I *should* have done – and I wanted to do, at the time, which makes me even *stupider* – was help her flip around to face me, confess my stupid love for her as well as I could (it wouldn’t have been very well; I’m quick on my feet, but not, it seems, when it comes to that sort of thing), and kiss her on the mouth. That would’ve been reasonable, considering it was what I wanted.

If I’d had any premonition abilities, I would’ve packed her up and we would’ve skipped town then, maybe got married in Vegas, forgot about King and Mike and Faraldo City and our stupid plans to run the place.

But I ain’t psychic, more’s the pity, and I’m pretty stupid. So I didn’t kiss her – *man*, I still wish I did – and instead, in place of everything I wanted to do, I asked her if she wanted to take the mattress off my bed and ride down the apartment stairs on it.

“What a stupid question,” she said.

It was a pain in the ass getting the mattress back *up* the stairs, of course, but we were determined, 'cause we had stuff in mind, and a mattress would make those things *infinitely* more comfortable. The fact that they started on the stairs, with the mattress between us and the cold tile, was proof.

"You like my mattress?"

"It's not bad," she said, half-breathlessly, as she tried to shove it through the door. "Could've done with less friction. And maybe better steering."

"It's Ikea."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, that explains the steering."

I remember how the mattress exploded through the front door, back into my apartment, and how we'd been leaning against it so hard that we tumbled through the door too, on top of it. And each other.

I tried my best to be suave, I really did. "Well, hello." I made a big show of looking around, after I kicked the door shut. "Come here often?"

She kissed me. That's why I'm stupid: she always started everything. I could have done so much more – I could have kissed her, I could have stood up to King for her, I could have run away with her – but I never did anything. I was so scared of pushing her away that I didn't remember to do anything to hold on to her.

"Once and a while," she muttered, when we broke apart, sort of. She was still pressed against me, her slim, wiry body warm and comfortable on my belly. And her lips, not even properly pulled away from mine, still barely touching.

"Huh." I raised an eyebrow. "You must like it here, then."

She just smirked, and laughed – not really *laughed*, just did that funny thing where all she does is breathe out, but I can always tell she's laughing at me – and kissed me again. "It's not bad."

"You think you'll come back?" I meant to say. I got most of it out, too, before she started kissing me, her dark hands sliding down my sides and peeling my shirt up.

"Tell you the truth?" She nuzzled my ear, and *fuck* I really should have said something then. I think about it now and all I can do is yell 'tell her you love her you idiot, just tell her', but that's all screaming at memories and ghosts.

“Tell you the truth,” she murmured, while I sort of writhed under her, “I wasn’t planning on leaving.”