

The sky outside was clouded over, a noted crisp to the air as a man sat at a gorgeous ebony table. He had a large array of papers spread on the table, a large sheet of paper on a clipboard, and a pen tucked behind his ear. There was hard rock music playing as background sound. He ran a hand through his hair as he gave a heavy sigh. Of course his partner's ex just had to bring them a doozy of a case. Well, not directly and he had no way to truly tie her to it, but he could be grumpy should he choose. He could hate her all he wanted though he'd always have the comfort that Jarek had chosen him.

As he went back to jotting down what they knew about the case so far, he dwelled on it. They'd been contacted by the local police department a few weeks ago concerning a serial killer that had sprung up. The person didn't seem to have a set MO or any sort of pattern as far as the victim targeting went. There was nothing to tie any of the deceased together and no set timeline. There wasn't even a set disposal method as some had been left out in public places while others had been buried well off the beaten path; some of the bodies had even been left far from intact. The only thing to tie the murders together was a small flame design etched into their skin.

As focused as he was on the case, he jumped when the door opened though the adrenaline faded away when he saw Jarek. Despite the bitter cold of winter, the man insisted on still wearing T-shirts and shorts when around the office. Though he was glad to see his partner, there was a detail that took him aback. "Were you out getting your tattoos touched up, Jar? They seem extra bright...." He'd always loved the gorgeous tattoos across his partner's skin. Those pretty swirls and nature elements all beautifully detailed and ornate were perfect though they were absolutely far more vibrant now.

Jarek laughed. "Just went to explore the last disposal site now that they finally gave that info to us," He handed over a piece of paper that detailed his findings. He had, in true Jarek fashion, taken note of every detail. There were some there was no noted use for and some that he had no clue how Jarek would have found out at least without way more time and special equipment.

He looked over the list, but nothing stood out at first that they didn't already know; it took a few moments before he noticed the new information. This victim had been brutally hacked to pieces at an unknown location. They knew it had been somewhere else as there was no notable blood found but there were no clues as to where. And yet, Jarek had dug deeper than the detectives had; he had found the specks of blood on the ground and, after another trip to the coroner, he'd found where the death had likely occurred. Wow...

Jarek nodded. "We can go check out the spot tomorrow as it'll start to get dark soon. For now, maybe you can show me what all you've gotten done, Derrick?" There was a gentle warmth to that deep, rich voice that he'd never get enough of.

Derrick grinned and laid out every little thing he'd deduced, and though it really wasn't that much, Jarek listened in earnest. He'd never felt so loved as he did with Jarek.

The two had discussed all the information they had before they sat together and turned up the music as they just enjoyed the wonderful company. Suddenly, the calm was shattered when the door was pounded on with such force that the room shook. Jarek's eyes snapped to the door and he let out a long string of curses. As he couldn't understand the words, Jarek must be using his

native tongue. Derrick had never heard his partner speak Russian ever before. He only ever knew that Jarek *was* Russian because of a case where he read the documents which were in Cyrillic script. Hell the man's name was Polish.

Jarek kissed his cheek before he went to open the door to avoid damage. A woman stormed into the room and Derrick was taken aback by the noted similarities between the two. So this was Jarek's mother? Her age certainly didn't point to sister.

The woman was rambling in Russian, notably both angry and entitled. The way she was attempting to talk down to Jarek both angered him and struck him as funny as she was so much smaller, but when he noticed the look on Jarek's face he couldn't suppress the shiver down his spine. Those gorgeous dark eyes were absolutely dead, all expression gone from his entire face. There was no anger, no annoyance, absolutely nothing. He'd never seen that before, not even with Amber and that poor excuse for a woman had given plenty of reasons. Whatever this woman had done to Jarek, it had clearly cut to the bone and reduced any connection to ashes long lost to the wind.

"Enough," Jarek told her, voice downright lethal; even when not directed at him, the sound sent a shiver down Derrick's spine. Jarek's expression never changed even as the woman fell silent, notably deflated. "You have no right to be here and I owe you absolutely nothing. Go the fuck away."

Derrick couldn't help but gasp at that. He'd never, *ever* heard Jarek curse before, not even when he was injured or when Amber tried to push his buttons. He could only imagine what the past held.

"Don't you dare take that tone with me, Yarik! I am your mother!" the woman screeched, voice painfully shrill.

Jarek snarled at that. "No, you are not and by your own choice. Because I wanted to chase my dreams, you cut me out. You have no right to be here. For that matter, how the fuck did you even find me?"

The woman laughed. "You tapped your magic so of course I found you. Now, you need to come home. Your father's getting old and his connection to magic is waning."

Derrick froze at that. What? Magic? Somehow he knew she meant true, real magic and not a matter of speech. And yet, magic was the thing of fairy tales...

Jarek laughed, though the sound was hollow and he noticed Jarek's tattoos were now actively moving along his skin. He also saw something he'd never seen before; there was a komodo dragon on Jarek's shoulder. Even as he fought to understand what was happening, he admired the tattoos. Perhaps he should be scared but he had full trust in his partner, utter adoration. He knew Jarek would never harm him.

"You may not be a witch by your own choice but you know that's not how that works; father may grow closer to his raven but the land would never lessen or tear those bonds. Just because you baby my sister and condone her not tapping the magic does not mean you can barge into the world of the one you tossed out. You are nothing to me anymore. Even my magic rejects you."

Jarek's voice and gaze were ice cold, but Derrick knew his partner well enough to see the ancient pain buried deep underneath.

The woman sputtered but took a step towards them. At that moment, an icy cold wind began to blow, pushing towards her and shoving her out. He watched in fascination as the tattoos along Jarek's skin glowed, the dragon on his shoulder opening its mouth to show fangs. As the wind pushed her more fiercely, the woman snarled in anger and stomped out before she could be forced out. She slammed the door behind herself with nearly the same power she had used to try to break the door.

As soon as the door was closed and a lock placed on, the wind went away as though it had never been. Jarek also slumped in his chair, clearly drained from the ordeal. Beyond the physical toll that must have taken, Derrick could see the emotional strain, the worry etched into the Russian's entire being. The man looked like he was on the edge of a steep cliff, waiting to know whether he'd be pushed off or pulled to safety.

The very sight broke Derrick as well. The strongest man he'd ever known seemed so very scared and, far worse, resigned to a horrible fate. He may be confused about what he had seen and on the verge of being overwhelmed but there was one certainty: Derrick would forever love and trust his Jarek.

There were no words as Derrick hugged Jarek, feeling the way the Russian stiffened before relaxing. With a detective case, words were needed to convey what had happened, why, and what would follow. Sometimes, though, they weren't needed. With matters of the heart, words would never be enough and he would rather show through actions that he would forever love Jarek.

Slowly, Jarek fully relaxed into the embrace, slumping down into Derrick. The sheer release of tension was palpable and left Derrick almost sad. He realized just how much weight Jarek had carried, how deeply he had buried so much and the sheer fear he must have had. Now he knew and he'd never, ever turn Jarek away.

Jarek gave an almost broken sound as he looked at Derrick. "Guess that I have a lot of explaining to do..."

Derrick laughed. "Please and thank you."

Jarek nodded. "So ja, magic is real. No, not the sort of things you see in Harry Potter or other fantasy stories, far more primal than that. Magic comes from the earth herself and those who have sworn themselves to the earth and her magic are known as witches, male and female alike. We have the magic tattooed into our skin and we may call upon it when needed; in return, we work to help the earth and keep her as free from human taint as can be. When I was young, I was raised to follow my father's footsteps and take over caring for our land when old enough. However, I became enamored by the world of law and wanted to pursue that instead. My *egg donor* became so angry that she kicked me out, banished me from the land. Because of her and my new path, my magic went dormant and became purely a thing of my past. Before today, it had been years since I tapped into it but this case made the earth call for me as she had secrets to tell. It was through the magic that I found the blood, and, well, you sadly saw what came after. I understand if you want

nothing more to do with me. . There was no intent to hide, I promise you, more the sheer fact that side of me was long buried.”

Jarek took a deep breath once he was done and took a drink of water. He kept his gaze down, head bowed and an air of defeat. Derrick watched and saw the resigned edge as he tried to process everything. To learn there was a world beyond what he knew and that Jarek had been a part of it, was way more than human, was crazy but he'd felt that wind that had come out of nowhere and died out just as instantly once the horrible woman was out. Derrick had seen how Jarek's tattoos had moved and flowed along his skin; how the leaves changed color, flowers opening and closing, vines moving along the skin. There was no doubt that had been real just as there was no doubt to him that magic was not inherently good or evil and absolutely nothing to fear.

Derrick scooted his chair closer to Jarek and wrapped an arm securely around him. “So what all can you do with your magic? Surely more than just make wind?” He made sure to keep his tone light and show fully that he just wanted to know more, never to judge.

Jarek's eyes snapped up and he studied Derrick before he laughed, relief pouring off in waves. “A witch can harness all aspects of the elements and nature though we cannot create from nothing.” The tattoos glowed as he turned the last drops of water from his cup into ice crystal hearts. “Magic takes energy just as any other work although the consequences are far more dire should you overextend. Far too many a witch has been killed or forever maimed due to hubris.”

Derrick nodded, awed by the hearts. “Understandable, so what do witches do? That egg donor mentioned that your father is getting old and the magic's leaving?”

Jarek gave a dark laugh. “She just wanted me to come home. Once you have opened yourself to the magic, the earth will never abandon you and she won't ever give up a witch. What a witch does on a day to day basis, especially for more rural areas, is keep pollutants out and repair any damage done to the earth. There are a lot of days where no work needs to be done and the witch pours their magic into the earth to top her up and keep an eternal cycle fresh. As long as there's no catastrophe, there's very little strain.”

Derrick nodded, fascinated. The world Jarek had come from sounded so fascinating.... “So...as a witch in touch with the earth, a-are you h-human?” He covered his mouth, eyes wide and fearful as soon as that last word came out of his mouth. What had he done?

Jarek blinked before he laughed, the sound pure and true. “No, not really. As soon as the tattoos were applied, I was more than human.” The Russian winced at that, eyes full of fear.

Now it was Derrick's turn to laugh. “That changes nothing for me, Jar. You are still the only one for me. The magic *adds*, not detracts.”

Jarek laughed as he pulled Derrick closer. “Seems we're both just silly. What do you want to do for the rest of the night, love?”

~~~~~

The air was crisp again the next day as Jarek and Derrick went to the kill site though today had the sun to help combat the chill. Today, Jarek wore long pants and a jacket over his T-shirt and heavy boots as they were outside. As silly as it was, that made Derrick happy. He always worried

that Jarek would catch a cold, always dressing like it was summer. Derrick was snapped back to reality as they stopped and he was assaulted with the stench of blood. There was no doubt that they had found the kill had occurred as the ground was saturated in dried blood. The only thing Derrick couldn't understand was why no one had found it before them.

They hadn't been here long before Jarek's eyes narrowed and he let out a stream of curses in Russian. "Everything makes sense now, Derr," he told his partner with anger in his voice and eyes.

Derrick arched an eyebrow. "Take pity on the clueless, Jar? You lost me."

Jarek chuckled. "The murders and the dump sites aren't random and that tells me exactly who the killer is. You see, there are areas throughout the world that are so-called hot spots where the magic is far stronger. Humans cannot sense them nor do they mean much to them but they are extremely tempting and powerful to witches. Each of these dump sites are on a hot spot, the stronger ones having more brutal murders. No sane witch would ever commit such atrocities. In fact, I doubt any witch would have done this though the killer knows all about magic."

Derrick's eyes widened. "Y-your egg donor?"

Jarek nodded. "Absolutely so now we need to gather all that we need to put her away for good."

Derrick nodded. "What do you need me to do?"

Jarek grinned, "Do you have your notebook, love?"

Derrick nodded and pulled the notebook out of his messenger bag as well as his pen though he looked at Jarek. "Pen or pencil?"

Jarek grinned. "Pen."

He proceeded to piece together what this location had told him and what the other locations spoke to. Derrick could watch the man's brilliant mind weave everything into an ironclad case, all without a hint of the supernatural world that had just been opened and reopened to them. There would need to be work back at the desk with laptops and case files to back it all up so there would be no wiggling away.

Even as he dutifully documented all of Jarek's notes, Derrick was blown away by not only Jarek's razor sharp mind but the magic as he saw tendrils of vines and grass as well as the earth herself reach up to spill all the secrets. There was a delicate dance that boggled the human mind and left no doubt that the Russian was far more than human. Even through the layers of clothes, Derrick could also see the flare of those gorgeous tattoos and the sight left him both in awe and so much more in love.

After around twenty minutes, they had a complete case and a full notebook and went back to the car. Derrick almost wanted to ask what the story was behind that poor excuse of a woman but he could see the cracks that had welled up to the surface. He had also worked out all he needed and the main thing to Derrick was that the "lady" had thrown away a perfect gem because he did not fit her mold.

The drive was taken up by loud rock music as both men were lost to their thoughts. There existed an almost anxious edge to the air as they were so close to a full end to the case that had

dominated their past year. Very soon, the case would be another one in the history books and that was a very, very welcome thing.

=====

Seven days was all it had taken to get everything wrapped up and tied with a pretty bow. Most of that had been tracking the suspect down as the judicial system was more than willing to lay down the red carpet to streamline the process to get the case together, jury selected, and for both sides to argue their points. As the defense had no leg to stand on, the jury came back in only an hour and that only so that they could take the time to ensure that there were no loopholes.

The media boom as a result of the case had been nearly overwhelming and there were almost more cases for the little detective agency than its owners could handle. Everyone wanted to use the agency that had put away such a horrific mass murderer. Much to the mens' chagrin, there were also many lured by their charm and handsome looks.

Now, the two were finally able to take a true break and catch up on all that had been shoved to the side for the case. Jarek had even reached out to his father and bridges torn away by outside forces were mended. There was even a date set for Jarek to take Derrick to his hometown and have his father and partner meet. Derrick had embraced his partner's magic as a wonderful new side to the man and was even going to start the process of having the magic etched into him as well.

Overall, neither could have ever anticipated what would happen that cloudy day, but both were forever grateful.