

Short Prose

IP: *The Black Jewels* (spec work)

The sun is high enough already that Daemon is sweating by the time he arrives on the doorstep of Lucivar's eyrie. He's breathing hard, still fighting to hold himself back from the killing edge, and he only hopes Marian doesn't realise anything is wrong.

"Don't you have somewhere to be this morning..." Lucivar trails off when he answers the door, and there's a warblade in his hand before either of them can blink. "What happened?"

Daemon manages a weak laugh. "Protocol happened. Witches and Queens and *males*," he feels his lip curl on the word. "In my house. They're in my house with my Queen and I..."

The bloodlust is beginning to ebb a little, even as he thinks of the first handful of guests to arrive for Jaenelle's formal audience before the birth. Never mind that she's no longer the Queen in name. Kaeleer's Heart is still Kaeleer's Heart, and enough people wanted to present well-wishes and gifts that it seemed prudent to stand on formal ceremony to ensure nobody was forgotten or slighted. A formal audience was also meant to calm *him*, a controlled influx instead of a haphazard trickle of guests and emissaries over the next few weeks.

So much for that.

Lucivar vanishes the warblade. "Shouldn't *you* be in your house, with your Queen? Actually, forget that. Shouldn't you be in your house with your pregnant wife?"

"I can't," Daemon says, hating himself for the words and knowing they're true. He can still feel it, the rage, the burning desire to kill the next strange male who walked through the front door of the Keep. "Jaenelle said I'd curdle the tea if I kept pulling faces every time Beale announced a new guest."

They look at each other for a moment, and Daemon knows that Lucivar is hearing everything he's not saying, all the things carried on his face and the taste of his psychic scent in the air.

"Marian baked this morning," Lucivar says finally, stepping back so Daemon can walk in.

"Marian always bakes," Daemon says, squashing down the pain of Lucivar sizing up whether he'll be a threat to his own wife and child.

But Lucivar grins and shuts the door behind them.

All the guests have left the Keep by the time Daemon returns, but the lingering stench of their psychic scents is still enough to make him grind his teeth. Lucivar was right, of course. He should have been here with his Queen, with his *wife*. It rankles that he wasn't. But...

Beneath the scents of the Queens, the witches, lie the scents of Warlord Princes. The residue alone is enough to shove him right up against the killing edge within seconds.

No, he thinks, leaning against the wall to steady himself. He couldn't have been here. He would have done far more than curdle the tea or embarrass Jaenelle.

It would have been a bloodbath.

Daemon lets the familiar scents soaked into the walls of the Keep soothe him for a few minutes before continuing down the hall to the family wing. There are no unfamiliar smells here, no challenges, no strong presences that make the Warlord Prince in him rear up ready to slaughter for the sake of his pregnant Queen. But he still feels too uneasy, too close to breaking to be comfortable seeking Jaenelle's presence.

He stops in the middle of the hallway. She's awake, but she won't say anything if he stays away. If there's one thing Jaenelle is good at, it's knowing when her males need space and when they need touch and acting accordingly.

The door just to the right is shut. He trails his fingers over the wood, reinforcing his own scent there before pushing it open and slipping inside.

The coven might be helping prepare for everything to do with the babies' arrival, but the nursery is something personal, purely Jaenelle. Mobiles hand-made from shells and feathers and pretty glass from all over Kaeleer twinkle in the moonlight over the cots; a clumsily-stitched quilt from Tera folded over the back of the rocking chair by the balcony. Daemon runs his hand over the fabric, absorbing the deep sense of love and effort that went into its making. Then over each cot in turn, the varnished wood and folded bed clothes placed just so by Jaenelle's careful hands.

Daemon sits down in the rocking chair and scrubs his hands over his face. The whole room is overflowing with so much care and intense love and joy it almost hurts to feel it. He lets it consume him, worming into the darkest parts of him that are an asset to a Queen but a liability in a father.

"Boyo."

Daemon's head jerks up at the sound of Saetan's voice from the doorway. Mother Night, he's so wrapped up in his own self-pity that he can't even sense the approach of another Black Jewel. He opens his mouth, then closes it again when he realises that nothing can atone for his behaviour and he should take the rap on the knuckles with good grace.

Saetan sighs. "I'm not going to chew you out, puppy. Come on." He beckons.

The dark colours and velvet of Saetan's study are comfortingly familiar and Daemon takes his usual seat across from Saetan's side of the desk.

"Are you calm enough for yarbarah, or will it just make you even more antsy?"

Daemon considers the question, rolling the idea of tasting blood on his tongue around for a second before replying. "I'm calm."

Saetan warms the yarbarah and hands Daemon a glass before taking his own seat. "Really? Because you could have fooled me."

"I meant I'm not close to the killing edge," Daemon snaps. "I can handle blood, I think I could even handle the scent of a Warlord Prince who isn't family. But..." He sighs, sips the blood wine and lets it warm him. Warm is good. Warm is so very, very preferable to the cold and everything that comes with it. "Everything else is still shit."

"Define everything."

He sets down the yarbarah so he can rake his fingers through his hair. "I don't know how to be a father."

"No man does at first," Saetan says mildly. "If that's really what has you in such a state, I can tell you right now you're no different to any other first time father since the beginning of time."

Daemon studies the man across the desk from him. There's still the faint thread of distrust between them, too much past pain and uncertainty for it to ever truly fade. Thinking of Saetan as a man, as his own father, Daemon doesn't want to admit how scared he is of himself right now. Thinking of him as the still-unofficial Steward, however... the words flow more easily. "I broke protocol today."

Saetan just nods. "You did. Not seriously, not in any way that will do lasting damage, but you did."

Daemon swallows and hopes Kaeleer's intricate give and take between protocol and duty and blood will still catch him. "I broke it to protect everyone." He pauses, watches Saetan's eyes. "To protect them from me."

There's no surprise on Saetan's face. "I know."

"Aren't you going to..." Daemon hesitates. "Warn me? Tell me what a danger I am to Jaenelle, to the babies?"

Understanding dawns in Saetan's eyes. "Oh, Daemon. I thought we smoothed on the last salve those particular wounds needed years ago."

Daemon doesn't say anything. It's true, they had. Debts had been paid and trust re-earned piece by careful piece. Now it's different. Now there are children to consider.

"You know you're not alone in this, Prince," Saetan says formally. "Any Warlord Prince reacts aggressively to anything he perceives as a threat to his Lady, let alone when said Lady is heavily pregnant for the first time with his offspring." He tilts his head. "You know this."

"Did you want to kill any male who came near Tersa, though? Or Luthvian?" Daemon blurts out. "Not even other Warlord Princes. Just any unknown male... did you want to destroy them, paint the walls with their blood before they even had a chance to become the slightest threat?"

To his credit, Saetan doesn't flinch. "No. But, you're missing several important points." He holds up his hand, long black nails glinting in the witchlight. "One. I cared for them. I still do. But they were witches I was contracted to service, not my Queen, not my wife, not the deepest love of my heart." He lowers a finger. "Two. You are the most volatile Warlord Prince in the history of the Blood. I'd be surprised if you didn't react more strongly to this situation than any other man would. Three, *did* you kill anyone today?"

"No," Daemon says softly, toying with the stem of his wine glass.

"Exactly. You felt yourself rising. You recognised that you would be unable to leash yourself appropriately for the situation and removed yourself from it before you could rise any further or do any harm." Saetan lowers his hand. "You broke protocol, but you should know by now how Kaeleer feels about protocol in the face of doing what is right. And today, Prince, you did exactly the right thing."

The relief that spreads through Daemon is real, if tentative. "I'm still... I still don't know that I should be a father."

"Jaenelle will temper you. She already does. Those infants, when you first hold them in your arms, they will temper you." Saetan smiles softly. "You don't know yet, the kind of power your own flesh and blood has over your heart." He reaches across the desk and rests his hand over Daemon's. "Your children will be cherished, and fiercely protected, and you have nothing to fear but the same things all new fathers fear."

"Like what?" Daemon takes the bait.

Saetan grins. "Like midnight feeds, and what to do when the young Princes come courting your little Queen, or how to handle your own son when he starts showing an interest in the sultry eyes witches are making at him. Fun things."

Those things sound hair-raising, not fun. But at least the words have calmed the rough edges of Daemon's heart, and he smiles. "Thank you for the counsel." He tilts his head. "I'll be calling on you for it a great deal in the future, I imagine."

“You’ll want a study. With a sturdy lock and the best shields you can put in place,” Saetan says. “But that’s for later. Go see to your Lady, Prince. I believe storytime was in full swing last I peeked in.”

A possessive spike runs up the length of Daemon’s spine at the words. He doesn’t want to share Jaenelle. Not now. But he swallows the feeling and heads down the hall.

Jaenelle is already in bed, extra pillows propping her up against the headboard. Breathing is hard for her at night so late in the pregnancy, with two infants pressing on her lungs when she lies down. She sleeps the best she can, and Daemon fusses so she naps during the day to make up for the poor rest.

Pressed up against her on both sides are the young Kindred, so many of them now. The wolf pups and Arcerian kittens, a couple of Scelties. There are a few parents lolling about on the floor, too.

Daemon watches from the doorway as she finishes the chapter, reading animatedly, reaching out to pet a nearby head every now and again. Most of the time, though, her free hand rests on the rounded shape of her belly.

Mine, Daemon thinks, and doesn’t realise he thought it out loud until Jaenelle’s eyes lock with his.

Yours, she agrees, before returning her attention to the book. *Just one more minute.*

She keeps reading to the rapt attention of the kittens and pups, and Daemon imagines what it will be like when their own children can snuggle into that pile of Kindred and listen to their mother’s midnight voice telling daring tales of the sorts of adventures he will try his hardest to ensure they never actually engage in.

“All right. More tomorrow,” Jaenelle says finally, closing the book and laying it on the bedside table.

The chorus of verbal and psychic howls is swiftly silenced by the parent wolves and cats, herding their little ones out with strict instructions to thank the Queen and not to bother her.

Once the last Kindred is through the door, Daemon steps just inside and closes it behind him. “I apologise.”

“Don’t,” Jaenelle says, patting the bed beside her. “Come here.”

Daemon does, crawling across the bed until he can nestle Jaenelle against his chest. He drops his head to kiss the spot on her shoulder, right where her scent is the strongest. It’s changed since she got pregnant, into something darker and muskier, the smell of a Queen about to give birth. “I should have been here,” he says softly, shifting his face to nuzzle at her hair. “But I couldn’t, and I’m sorry.”

Jaenelle huffs out a breath, shoving the bedclothes down and lifting her nightshirt over her belly. “Everyone else missed you more than I did. You would have fussed anyway. I probably had more fun without you.”

“Did you get lots of lovely things?” Daemon asks, curling his hand over the roundness of her stomach, stroking. He can feel the shape of the twins within her, a foot here, an elbow there.

“Nothing that will be as lovely as having these two out of me and in my arms instead,” she says, taking his hand and guiding it. “Here. This is the boy.”

“Have you thought any more about names?” Daemon rubs the vague curve of the infant. *His son*. The thought sends another possessive shudder through him, laced with fierce joy instead of bloodlust.

“I was thinking Lucian, for the boy,” she says, combing her fingers through Daemon’s hair.

Daemon smiles, dropping down to lay his cheek against her stomach. He kisses it first, one side where the girl is, the other for the boy. “Saetan Lucian, for his father’s brother, and his father’s father.”

“That works.”

“And the girl?” He can hear the babies moving, the gentle rush of fluid and occasional kick.

It takes longer for Jaenelle to answer this time. “Rose,” she says finally, so softly. “I’d like to call her Rose.”

Daemon stills. It’s a reminder, in remembrance. Like so much that they have done over the years, building on blood and ashes.

He can’t ruin this. He won’t let himself.

“Lucian and Rose,” he says softly, whispering the words to the soft skin separating the babies from the world. Then he looks up at Jaenelle. Her eyes are soft and full of nothing but joy, only haunted at the very edges. “I love them.”

Jaenelle smiles at him, like she knows he’s not just talking about the names.

The four of them, forever. He’d fight a million times over to keep this safe, to hold on to what they’ve built. He just hopes he won’t have to.

“Forever,” Jaenelle agrees, stroking his hair.

Daemon is falling asleep to the sounds of their babies in the womb and the gentle pressure of Jaenelle’s fingers before he realises that he hadn’t said that out loud, either.

